

ALFRED

JULY 35¢

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY
MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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Dear Readers:

As a rule I don't "go" for flag waving but, with June 12 being Flag Day and the Fourth of July approaching, it seems only fitting to remind everyone what this Grand Old Flag represents: "My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty, of Thee I sing".

These words bring to mind an experience a friend had last year while on business in one of our largest cities. It was the Fourth of July and not knowing anyone, he went for a walk. Enroute he passed a new, monolithic, luxury hotel and seeing no flag sharing this architectural elegance he went inside and questioned the desk clerk. Smiling patronizingly the young man said he would take the matter up with the manager. Finally he admitted they had no flag but that one had been ordered. My friend said he hoped so, because the name of the hotel was THE WASHINGTON.

Apathetic as we may seem at times, our true patriotism glows like a Fourth of July sparkler when an occasion arises where we may display it.

Incidentally we're displaying some sparkling new twists in mystery plots in this issue, the kind that will really start your summer vacation off with a resounding bang.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Sometimes it is difficult to know how to protect the very young from a sickness far more devastating than a virus.



The Epidemic

ter finished nailing a new step into place, and a man in paint-spattered coveralls—he was the town's mayor—leaned forward with dripping brush to paint in the fresh wood.

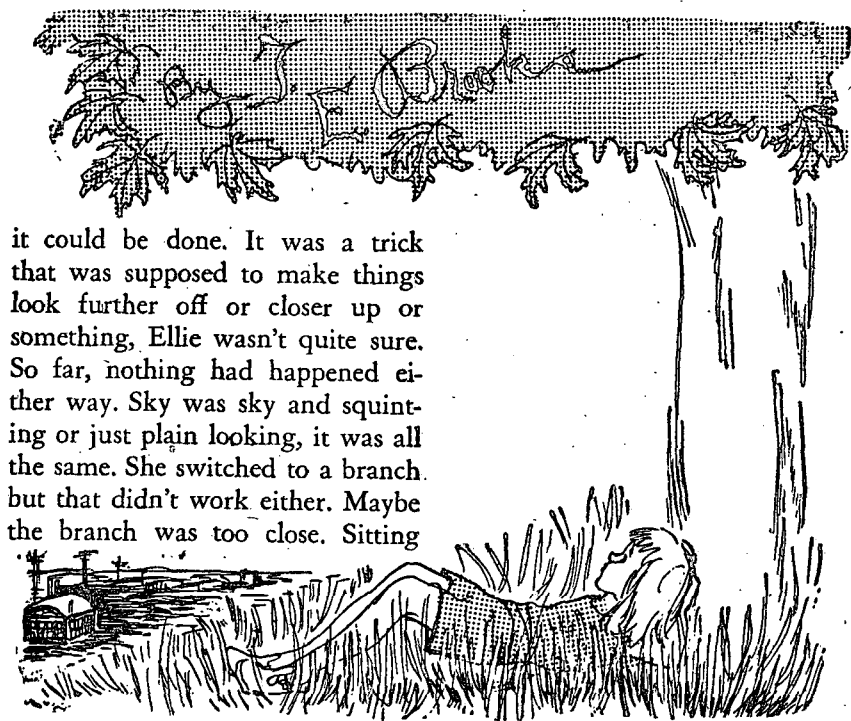
The streets were almost empty, the public places—the theater, the library, the Community Park—all closed. In the residential areas the doors were shut, the front yards deserted. There wasn't a child in sight. The hot summer day hung muted and motionless. Only the shimmering heat moved and, mingling with it, emanating from behind the grim faces and closed

Heat quivered in the town, concentrating in the short business block of brick and concrete. Across the street, the maple trees and green summer grass of the town square breathed humidity into the air, bringing sweat to the faces of the men repairing the bandstand. They worked silently, grimly, covering the scars and discolorations with fresh white paint. A carpen-

doors, rose the stifling, unwholesome effluvium of fear.

Behind the big white house on Herger Road, Ellie Thompson lay on her back in the grassy hollow between two forgotten maples at the south end of the garden. Her eyes, fixed on a scrap of heaven through the branches overhead, worked in a series of squints—half closing, opening, half closing again—trying to telescope the patch in a long distance focus. She had heard

up, she searched the horizon for a better subject. Beyond the low brick wall that marked their own property line was an open field, broken about a quarter of a mile south by the railroad tracks. After that came the row of willows that stretched for miles along the river banks. No single tree wore a separate outline. They were all jumbled together. She reeled in her gaze, pulling back to the railroad track, following it a few yards down the line to the abandoned doll factory. Her gaze fastened on



it could be done. It was a trick that was supposed to make things look further off or closer up or something, Ellie wasn't quite sure. So far, nothing had happened either way. Sky was sky and squinting or just plain looking, it was all the same. She switched to a branch, but that didn't work either. Maybe the branch was too close. Sitting

the factory, securing it carefully in her sights. A rapid succession of blinks and squints did no more than blur the edges of the old building. Ellie flopped back in disgust, plucking a long blade of grass, sticking it between her teeth, chewing desultorily. It was so *boring*, this epidemic. There was nothing to *do*.

In the house, Ellie's mother, preparing dinner, worked with quick, nervous movements. Every few minutes she paused, glancing through the kitchen window for some sight of Ellie in the backyard; Ellie's blonde hair catching the last rays of sun, the flying remnants of an imperfect cartwheel, a small tennis shoe wagging in the air; anything that told her Ellie was there, safe in the yard. This time she stopped, frozen at the edge of the sink. There was no sign of life, nothing; only the lawn, the vegetable garden, the uncut grass beyond it. Mrs. Thompson felt terror rip through her heart. Gripping the sink, trying to control the fear, she cried, "Joanne!" and felt dismay at the shrill panic she heard in her voice.

"Yes, Mother," Joanne returned quickly, alarmed, from upstairs.

"Do you see Ellie? I can't see her anywhere."

"She's lying in the long grass, down by the maples. I can see her

perfectly from my bedroom window."

"Oh. . . ." It was inaudible, almost a sob, then louder, to carry upstairs, "Thank you, Joanne. Keep her in sight will you, dear, while I finish dinner?"

Mrs. Thompson felt the adrenal-in drain off, felt the weakness, the trembling in its wake. Toward evening the panic always grew sharper, quivering at the edge of her brain, poised to plunge at the slightest provocation through her body. She drew a deep breath and halved the hard-boiled eggs, pushing the yolks out deftly with her thumb. She wished Allan would come home so she could call Ellie into the house.

Allan had worn old work clothes this morning and he would probably be covered with paint when he got home. If Ellie saw him dressed that way, she would know that he hadn't gone to the office today; she would bristle with curiosity and there would be questions, everlasting questions. Gwen Thompson's brain, already weighted with fabrications, curdled at the thought of still a new one. What possible reason could she give Ellie for her father's painting the bandstand in the middle of the "epidemic"?

There was a sound in the garage and Gwen stiffened a moment,

listening. Yes, thank God, it was Allan. There was the noise of the car sliding into place, the motor cutting off, the garage door closing. She moved into the service porch, through the connecting door. Allan, white-faced, smelling of turpentine and sweat, smiled vaguely. "Hello, honey," he said, moving past her, into the little utility bathroom off the service porch.

He looked positively ill. "Allan," she said anxiously, "Are you all right?"

He mumbled something, soaping his hands at the sink, splashing water on his face. She didn't understand his answer but she found comfort in her own. "It's the heat, darling," she murmured, handing him a towel, "And that awful smell of paint. You're not used to it."

"Not the heat or the paint," he said, his voice muffled in the towel. "You get used to that in a hurry." He came out from under the towel. "What we weren't used to," he said slowly, his gaze inverting, seeing something in his own mind, "was the look of that bandstand when we got there this morning."

Her eyes widened. "You mean they didn't have it cleaned up?"

He glanced at her, surprised that she hadn't realized the full

purpose of his day. "No, honey," he said gently. "That's what we were there for, to clean it up."

Horror and incredulity crept into her voice. "You mean little Sharon was . . . still there?"

"No, of course not, Gwen," he said quickly, trying to make his voice matter-of-fact. "Sharon was taken to the mortuary last night."

Her face relaxed a little. "Then it *was* cleaned up." She paused, her breath catching in sudden comprehension. "I mean, except for the painting and . . . and everything." Abruptly she moved into his arms, holding him tightly. "Oh, Allan," she breathed, "I didn't realize. It was all there, wasn't it? Everything but the poor little body. . . ." She buried her face on his shoulder. "What a hideous day for you!" For a moment they clung together, holding each other in pain and horror and love. Then she lifted her face, moving back a little. "Has Morgan City been called in yet?"

He nodded grimly, unbuttoning his shirt. "That's what took us so long to get started this morning. We had to stand around and look at it till their Homicide Squad finished up. Backus didn't even call them till six a.m."

Her face twisted a little. "That man must be out of his mind. *Why*, Allan? *Why* didn't he call

them the first time?" It was a lament.

"He wanted to crack it himself, that's why. Be a big man." There was venom in Allan's voice. "He's cracked something all right. His political career. Right down the middle. He'll never be elected to anything again, not in this town. He'll be damn lucky if there isn't a third murder around here—his own." Allan yanked open the shower door, glad for the momentary release of anger.

Gwen picked his shirt off the floor. "Did Morgan City find anything new?"

He pretended not to hear, groping into the shower, starting to turn on the faucets. She reached out, touching his arm, staying the motion. "It's all right, Allan," she said softly. "I have to know. What did they find?"

"The murder weapon," he said.

"What was it, Allan. . . ."

"Harvey Coleman's trumpet. Remember, it disappeared after the last band concert."

She nodded, waiting, gripped in a sudden, abhorrent fascination.

"They found it under the bandstand steps. It was dented and twisted . . ." He broke off, bending down to unlace his shoes. "They think it's the same weapon that killed little Barbie Jean."

"Allan," she said, "Was Shar-

on . . . Was her hand . . . ?" She stopped, swallowing, the question stuck in her throat.

"Yes," he said quietly. "It was gone. They found it under the steps along with the trumpet. They found Barbie Jean's hand, too. Late this afternoon. In the park."

"Oh, God, Allan . . ." The fascination was gone, leaving only the horror. She felt herself beginning to tremble again. "They've got to catch him," she breathed. "They will, won't they, Allan? The Morgan City police *will* catch him, won't they?" Looking down at her, a tenderness swept through Allan. She seemed suddenly young, as young and as vulnerable as Ellie. He lifted her chin in his hand. "They'll catch him, honey," he said. "Eventually. I wish I could tell you not to worry, but I can't. We've got to worry until it's safe again, until this maniac is hauled in." He paused a moment, frowning, then he reached into the shower, twisting the faucets. "I think," he said, raising his voice over the noise of the water, "that we'd better tap the savings and send you and the girls on a little trip somewhere until this whole thing is over."

Instinctively, Gwen shook her head. "We can't," she said. "We just can't."

"I think we have to." He

dropped the rest of his clothes on the floor and climbed into the shower, thrusting his head back out abruptly. "Where's Ellie now?"

"She's in the yard. Joanne's been keeping an eye on her. I'll call her in now. I was waiting for you to come home."

Gwen scooped up the rest of the dirty clothes and moved out of the bathroom, back toward the kitchen. In the service porch, the cries broke through to her. It was Ellie's voice, shrill with excitement, coming from the yard. "Joanne, look! It's a fire, it's a fire! The doll factory, it's burning!" Gwen raced to the kitchen door, stopped by the sight across the fields, the peach-colored sheet of flame leaping from the doll factory. Her heart gave a lurch, her eyes pulling away, following the sound of Ellie's voice. It was all right. Ellie was down by the wall and Joanne was with her, her arm around Ellie's shoulders, gently coaxing her back toward the house.

Gwen turned, hurrying for the telephone. Thank heaven for Joanne. She'd been wonderful through this whole thing. She wasn't acting like a teenager; she was acting like a woman. Blinking through quick, senseless tears, Gwen dialed the fire department, her chest heaving with sudden

thanks that at least one of her children was safe, too old to be prey for a maniacal killer who attacked only little girls.

The fire trucks were screaming into sight when Allan, pulling on a fresh tee shirt, hurried into the yard. "Where's the fire?" he shouted. Then he caught sight of the blazing doll factory and breathed, "Good Lord . . ."

Two engines turned in at the forsaken wedge of gnarled road that led to the doll factory, and finally the fire chief's car, and then there was abrupt silence as the sirens were turned off and the procession bumped the rest of the way mutely, in a strange, soundless vacuum.

Gwen was the first to speak. "That's the whole fire department, Allan," she murmured anxiously. "What if there's a fire in another part of town? Wouldn't it be better to just let the old factory burn down?"

"Not with this wind picking up," Allan replied. "It'll spread if they don't get it under control."

Ellie said, "It happened just when the train went by. The train whistled and then wham! There was this great big blast of fire."

"Probably a train spark," her father answered. "There might have been some old chemicals still around."

"It's beautiful," Joanne breathed, watching a new jet of flame stab the sky.

"It sure is," Ellie agreed reverently. She wished that the eye squinting thing worked. All she could see against the blaze were the little shapes of firemen bobbing around the big trucks. She couldn't see the hoses or the water or anything. If she could just get a little closer. . . . Without much hope she said, "Can I go a little closer and watch?"

"No, you may not," her mother replied flatly. "You know perfectly well you're forbidden to leave the yard."

It was her mother's tone of finality that triggered Ellie's impulse to protest. "But it's very educational," she countered plaintively. "I never saw a fire put out before. You want me to have an education, don't you?"

Ellie's father turned to her, his face stern. "Under no circumstances, Ellie, educational or otherwise, not for fire or emergency or any other reason, are you to leave this yard. Do you understand?"

Ellie's nostrils flared under the bite of sudden tears. "You don't have to get mad at me," she retorted accusingly. "Besides, there's nobody else going. How can I catch an epidemic if there's no-

body even there to catch it from?"

"There are the firemen, Ellie," Joanne put in kindly.

"Then why don't they catch it from each other?"

There was a pause, then solemnly, "Because they've already had it."

Gwen cast a wry look at her husband and reached for Ellie's hand. "Come on, Sweetie," she said. "Dinner's almost ready and you can watch the fire from the table while we eat."

A few hours later when the fire department was getting ready to leave, and only a glowing arch remained where the flames had been, Ellie turned disconsolately from the living room window. "It's almost out," she said sadly. There was nothing to do again. It was even worse thinking about tomorrow. There would be nothing to do all day long. Suddenly inspired, she said, "Daddy, will you play me a game of chess if I promise to sleep late in the morning?" If she stayed up late tonight and slept instead in the morning, tomorrow wouldn't last nearly so long.

Behind his newspaper, Allan heaved a sigh of resignation. "All right," he replied patiently. "If Mother's agreeable to your staying up, I'll play. But only on one condition. . . ."

"I won't cry if I lose," Ellie broke in ecstatically. "I promise I won't cry. Okay, Mamma? Do I have to take my bath first or can I wait till after?"

"Better first," her mother smiled. "You'll be too sleepy after."

"Okay. I'll hurry."

When she was gone, Gwen looked at her husband. "Allan," she said, her voice troubled, "do you think we ought to tell her the truth?"

He shot her a quick look. "What do you mean?"

She got up restlessly and moved to the window, staring out at the cathedral-like arch still glowing from the doll factory. "It's just that I don't think this is going to work much longer. I don't think we should have used an epidemic as the reason in the first place." She turned from the window, facing him. "Allan, it's been hell this last week keeping her constantly in sight every minute of the day, never really sure she wouldn't wander off. I know how you feel about it, but if we told her the real reason she'd *understand*. She wouldn't be constantly nagging to go somewhere, always poking around the limits of the yard." She sat down opposite him, her eyes pleading. "It's a big yard, Allan. I worry even when she's in it. If we told her the real reason,

she wouldn't even leave the house. She'd be safe."

Allan stared at her, an angry flush rising in his face. "Gwen, have you lost your mind? Ellie's eight years old. You just don't *tell* an eight year old things like that. How does it sound? Ellie, come over here, I have a little current events item for you. There's a killer at large. Two of your classmates, little girls you've known all your life, grown up with, well, they've been murdered. Some maniac's on the loose and nobody's caught him yet, so you'd better stay in the house. Stick around now, close, or he's liable to murder you, too." Allan slapped down the newspaper. "Gwen, for heaven's sake!"

She was shaking her head, trying to stop him. "Not that way, Allan, please . . . Don't be cruel. We wouldn't have to tell her that way."

"There isn't any other way. No matter what we tell her, no matter how pretty we say it, that's what it is and that's what she'll live with!"

A small, futile sound caught in Gwen's throat. She turned her face away. Allan moved to her side, his anger draining off. "Honey, he said gently, "you're just upset. You wouldn't even consider telling her this if you weren't."

She looked at him, feeling the panic rise again, bubble near the surface. "Yes I would, Allan," she breathed. "It's better to have Ellie terrified than murdered." They heard the thumping of Ellie's feet then, the slapping of slippers on the stairs. Allan hugged her briefly, reassuringly. "It'll be all right," he said quickly. "As soon as Ellie's in bed, we'll make some kind of plans to get the three of you out of here until this whole thing is over."

A moment later, Ellie, buttoning her robe on crooked, padded into the room. "Boy, this'll be the first time I ever beat Daddy! I got my system worked out perfect." She groped around her knees for the missing button to fasten into the remaining buttonhole.

Gwen called her over, unbuttoning the bathrobe, starting all over again. "You missed the one at the top," she said.

Allan, setting up the chess set, raised his head. "I understand this system of yours is for stalemate."

Ellie nodded. "It works fine, too. I won Joanne easy today."

Her father looked disapproving. "Ellie," he said, "You don't *win* when you stalemate."

"I know," she said cheerfully, "But it's better than losing. Thank you, Mamma." The buttons were in sequence now and Gwen rose,

giving Ellie a parting kiss on the cheek.

"Wish me luck, Mom," Ellie called after her.

In the kitchen, Gwen stood motionless for a moment. Joanne had been an angel, letting Ellie stalemate a chess game. Poor Joanne. She'd been cooped up all week at home, too, helping to keep track of Ellie. It wasn't fair to Joanne . . . Gwen reached for the coffee pot. Fair, she thought bitterly. What a silly word. It wasn't fair to Sharon or Barbie Jean, either. The thought laced a shiver up her spine and she pressed against the stove, trying to still the sudden jarring in her body. Then abruptly, giving up the struggle, her shoulders heaved and silently she tipped her face into her hands and wept.

During the night a storm moved in, threatening the heat wave. The sky was overcast the next morning, the hot air heavy with unshed rain. At breakfast, Joanne pushed the damp hair from her forehead. "You could drown in this weather," she said.

"I can't eat, Mom," Ellie said, pushing her food away. "It's too hot." Summer had never been too hot before. Usually—when there wasn't an epidemic—she set out right after breakfast with her bathing suit and a towel and

lunch in a brown paper bag, to spend the day with the other kids at the swimming pool in the park. Now the park was closed and two of the kids were already sick with the epidemic and maybe they would even die . . . Her thoughts drew up. "Did Sharon die yet?" she said.

No one answered for a moment, then her mother, whose face suddenly looked very white and tired, said, "I haven't heard from Sharon's mother in a few days, Ellie. Perhaps I'll call her today."

"I wish you would, Mom." It saddened Ellie to think of Sharon sick. The weather saddened her, too, and her mother's pale face. A sudden fear clutched Ellie. "Mamma," she said, "Are you sick?"

Allan, feeling again the swift rise of anger against his own helplessness, said brusquely, "Mother's not sick, Ellie. Mother's tired and worried. You've worn her out this week trying to keep an eye on you. If you'd just be willing to accept things and stop complaining, I don't think she'd be so tired."

Ellie's sadness amalgamated, fusing into a great contrite lump in her throat. "I'm sorry, Mamma," she said remorsefully.

Gwen glared at her husband. It was enough that Ellie was miserable. Why did he have to make her

guilty, too? Indignantly, she snapped, "For heaven's sake, Allan, it isn't *Ellie's* fault!"

Allan swung around, looking carefully at her. "It isn't my fault, either," he said tersely. There was a moment of charged silence. Joanne and Ellie glanced at their parents, at each other, at the food on their plates. Gwen saw their faces and felt her heart go soggy, felt the tears push up behind her eyes. "Allan," she said quickly, reaching out, touching his hand, "forgive me. I'm just jumpy, I guess. . . ."

"We're all getting on each other's nerves," he said quietly. He turned to his daughters. "Look, girls, I've tried to make reservations at the Lake, but they can't take you and Mother on such short notice. I'm going to try again from the office this morning. If I can find a place that can take you in the next day or so, I'll be able to get you out of here. If not, we'll just have to make the best of this till it's over. Now it'll make things a lot easier on everyone," he added pointedly, looking at Ellie, "if we all decide to cooperate."

Ellie bobbed her head, blinking rapidly to hold back the tears. "I already decided, Daddy," she said. "I'll cooperate, honest. I'll cooperate on everyone." They smiled

and Ellie promised herself solemnly that she wouldn't bother anyone the whole day.

Ellie trailed her mother around the house all morning, doggedly assisting with the housework, putting dishes away half-dried, blundering through the bedmaking, finally, to Gwen's relief, retiring with a dust cloth to the living room. Outdoors, the skies were still gray and the heat was even thicker now, almost wet. At ten o'clock, the phone rang for Joanne. Ellie, carefully working the dust off the carved legs of an end table, overheard the conversation and ran to her mother in the kitchen.

"Mamma, it's someone over at Crestline asking Joanne to go swimming. Joanne said she couldn't go because she had to help you take care of me. She doesn't have to take care of me, Mamma. I can take care of myself, honest. Do they have an epidemic at Crestline?"

Gwen, peeling vegetables at the kitchen sink, paused, hearing the entreaty in Ellie's voice. Poor little Ellie. She felt responsible now for everyone's misery. The call must be from Kathy Mills. Kathy's father had moved to Crestline last year. It would be an opportunity for Joanne to get out of the house, have a little fun. And Ellie really

was cooperating. Gwen felt that Ellie, for the first time, was ready to accept the Quarantine. She turned from the sink, drying her hands and hugged Ellie briefly. "No, honey, there's no epidemic at Crestline. Come on. Let's go tell Joanne before Kathy hangs up."

It was a barbeque party. Joanne would be spending the night at Crestline. Gwen talked with Mrs. Mills. Kathy's brother would pick up Joanne after lunch and bring her home tomorrow. When Gwen got off the phone, Joanne hugged her hard and Ellie, beside herself, hugged them both.

There was a sudden festivity in the house; the bustle of packing, digging out the suitcase, ironing Joanne's best cotton, sewing a button on her tennis dress. . . . A dozen times Joanne said, "Mother, are you sure you won't need me?" or "I just know it's going to rain," and each time her mother answered with a variation of, "No, dear, I won't need you," and "It won't matter if it rains. They're having the party on a covered deck."

The sense of festivity lingered through the goodbyes, thinning out abruptly, following Joanne as she drove off with Kathy's brother. Ellie darted down the porch steps, into the yard, keeping the

car in sight as long as she could. When it disappeared she turned, looking suddenly bereft, and trudged back up the steps. Gwen gathered her close, holding her tightly for a moment. "Joanne's going to have a lovely time," she said. "Shall we make some lemonade and maybe have a game of chess?"

Ellie remembered the promise she had made herself. All week long her mother had done things with her. Now the ironing bag was full—Mamma had to fish through a huge bundle to find Joanne's cotton—and the mending was piled up. . . . Ellie shook her head. "No," she said slowly, "My system's no good anyway. Daddy beat me easy last night. I got to work on it."

"Well," her mother said comfortingly, "Let's at least make the lemonade."

The afternoon wore on, quiet, muffled with the summer stillness that comes before a storm. Gwen moved with her mending basket to the side porch where she could keep an eye on Ellie in the backyard. Ellie, fiddling with her pocket chess set down between the maples, listened to the stillness. Even the tiny insect noises were gone. Everything was hushed, expectant, waiting for the rain. There was only the sound of

her own movements and the occasional squeak of springs as her mother shifted positions on the glider.

After awhile there wasn't even the squeak of springs. Ellie raised her head, motionless for a moment, listening to the silence. Then, wedging the chess set into her pocket, she stood up and walked back to the porch.

Her mother was asleep, her thimbled finger still crooked behind the needle. In her lap, the mending rose and fell with the soft, deep sounds of exhaustion. Ellie tip-toed over, cautiously slipping the needle from her mother's fingers, sticking it into the little red pin cushion on the lid of the mending basket. Then she turned and tip-toed back to the edge of the porch.

From the top step she had a full view of the doll factory, the burned-out arch black now, a mysterious, giant half moon against the red brick. There was no one in sight, not on the streets or sidewalks or in the fields beyond the house. You really *couldn't* catch an epidemic if there was no one to catch it from. And besides, the fire would have burned all the germs at the doll factory. That was the way you sterilized things, like with a needle when you took out a sliver.

Ellie hitched her shoulders under the thin straps of her sun suit. Her mother really wouldn't mind because of the doll factory being so sterilized and everything. Besides, she would only stay a minute. Her mother probably wouldn't even wake up.

She took the steps quickly, quietly, hurrying across the lawn, past the maple trees and over the low stone wall at the edge of their property.

The open fields were cooler than the yard and the gloom was different out here. There was no canopy of leaves overhead to double the shade, only the even, murky overcast from the clouds above. A wonderful sense of freedom gripped Ellie; it was the first time in over a week that she had set foot from the yard. She began to run, creating her own breeze, feeling it lap through her long, straight hair. The field was full of ruts and pot holes, and each time she stumbled and kept her balance she laughed wildly, privately, jubilantly, until at last, as she neared the factory, she tripped over an edge of concrete and fell down. The chess set flipped out of her pocket, the pieces scattering over the broken paving and Ellie sat up, hugging her knee, rocking with pain.

A voice, soft and articulate,

drifted past her ears. "Did you hurt yourself, little girl?"

Ellie jumped, her head pivoting, turning toward the sound. He sat just a short distance away, under the charred arch that led to the factory basement.

Ellie smiled wanly. "I sure did," she said. "I banged my knee bone."

"I thought," he said admiringly, "that you did well not to tumble much sooner. I've been watching you clear across the field and it looked like splendid fun."

"It was," Ellie replied matter-of-factly, "till I hurt myself." She rose, limping, to gather the chess pieces. The man reached out, picked something off the ground, transferring it to his other hand. "Have you broken your tøy?" he asked.

"It's not a toy exactly," Ellie said. "It's a game and I can't find one of the pawns." She poked through the long grass that pushed up between the cracks in the paving.

"Is this it?" he said, extending his arm.

She rose and moved toward him, seeing the tiny pawn in the palm of his hand. She lifted her head, smiling into his face. "Thank you," she beamed, starting to take it. "How did it get way over here I wonder. . . ." Her

hand touched his and she broke off abruptly, giving a small involuntary jerk, starting to draw away. He didn't move and she peered down into his upturned palm, feeling a small burst of shock. His hand was fat and perfectly rounded and stiff looking and it had a pinkish gray color. She bent a little closer for a better look. The pinkish gray color was a glove. He had slowly raised his other hand for her to compare. It was nothing like this one. It was thin and bony and it wore no glove. She looked at him, frowning. "Why are you wearing just one glove?" she said.

"To cover an artificial hand,"



he answered. He did not move.

"What's an artificial hand?"

"It's a hand that's manufactured to look like a real one."

"Where's your real one?"

"I lost it in an accident when I was a boy."

"I'm sorry," Ellie breathed. She was genuinely saddened.

He looked vaguely disconcerted. "Don't you want your pawn?" he said.

Ellie had forgotten the pawn. She dipped now into his artificial hand and scooped it out, returning it to its little case. "Do you play chess?" she asked.

"I used to," he replied tonelessly. "When I was in England."

"What were you doing in England?"

"I lived there. I taught school."

Ellie made a wry face. "School, huh. What kind of school?"

"A girl's school."

"I'll bet you're glad you don't do *that* any more."

"No," he said, his voice gradually animating, "I rather liked it. I wish I could go back."

"Why don't you?"

"Because . . . well because sometimes I'm rather sick."

Ellie recoiled. "Is it the epidemic?" she said in alarm.

"Epidemic? What epidemic?"

"You know, the one that's going around." He looked confused and

she elaborated. "It's catching. Everybody gets it. Is your sickness catching?"

"No, my sickness isn't catching. No one can have it but me."

Ellie relaxed. "That's good," she said, settling down beside him. "Do you want to play chess?"

"Do you really know how?" His voice was flat again. "Most little girls your age don't know how to play chess."

"I'm not very good but I think I can stalemate," she answered.

"Stalemate!" He gave an odd little laugh. "Very crafty. Little girls are *always* very crafty. All right, set up the board."

She hesitated, her gaze traveling slowly from his real hand to his artificial hand. For a moment she looked troubled, then in a swift, decisive movement, she thrust one arm behind her back.

His real hand shot out, grabbing her other wrist. "What are you doing!"

"Just putting my arm behind my back."

"Why?"

"So we'll be even."

He frowned, his whole face suddenly twisting. Still tightly gripping her wrist, he turned away, his shoulders starting to move a little, rocking gently.

Ellie stared for a moment, dismayed. Then she reached out,

patting his arm. "Don't feel bad about your hand," she said softly. "It's all right. I like you anyway. I like you even better because of your hand."

He turned back, facing her, his upper lip beaded with sweat, a bright red tracing the spidery network of veins in his eyes. "I like you, too," he said in a thick, coated voice. She felt his fingers loosen on her wrist and then with a quick, sharp movement, he jerked his hand away.

"Get out of here," he muttered, so low that she thought she had misunderstood him. She waited a moment, uncertainty climbing into her eyes.

"I said get out of here!" It was a yell, high-pitched and frenzied, almost like the voice of a woman. He thumped the ground with his hand, his face distorting, parting his lips flat against his teeth. "Get out of here, get out of here. . . ."

Ellie scrambled to her feet.

"Get out! Get out! Get out!"

The cries of rage and anguish followed her across the fields, echoing through her skull, louder than the roar of her own pulses. Stumbling, falling, pushing to her feet, she ran, sobs of terror and heartbreak pulling at her throat. She hurtled the low brick wall and raced into her own yard.

"Mamma, Mamma!"

Her mother was instantly awake. Ellie clattered up the steps and fell into her arms. "He screamed at me, Mamma, and told me to go . . . He told me to go . . ."

"Who told you to go! Ellie, what are you talking about?"

"The man, Mamma, the man with the hand . . ."

Ellie's words dissolved then and her face crumpled and her mother dragged her, sobbing and shaking, into the house.

Ellie didn't see the human dragnet that converged on the doll factory. She didn't see the police officers or the patrol cars or the man as he was driven up the gnarled wedge of road past her house. She didn't even remember that there was lightning and rain and thunder all through the night. She only knew that the next morning, the heat wave was broken and the yard glistened in the sun, and right after breakfast she set out with her bathing suit and towel and lunch in a brown paper bag to spend the day at the swimming pool in the park.

Passing the old factory road, she glanced down at the burned-out archway. Her mother had explained about strangers and how you never knew which ones were sick in their minds so you should stay away from them all. Ellie was quite sure though, that if his mind had been well, he wouldn't have chased her away. She looked down, kicking morosely at a stone. If his mind had been well, they could have played chess every day.

From behind, she heard Stacy Patterson's voice calling to her. "El-lie . . . Wait up . . ."

Ellie turned, waving vigorously.

Stacy caught up and they walked side by side, swinging their lunches. "Boy, is it ever good to see you," Ellie said.

"Me, too," Stacy breathed fervently. "What'd you do all week?"

"Nothing. All I did was play stupid old chess."

"Me, too. Only I played Monopoly. With my stupid old brother."

"Did you win?"

"No."

"Me either. I didn't even stalemate."



Condescension may oftentimes prove to be the trigger for a deadly boomerang.

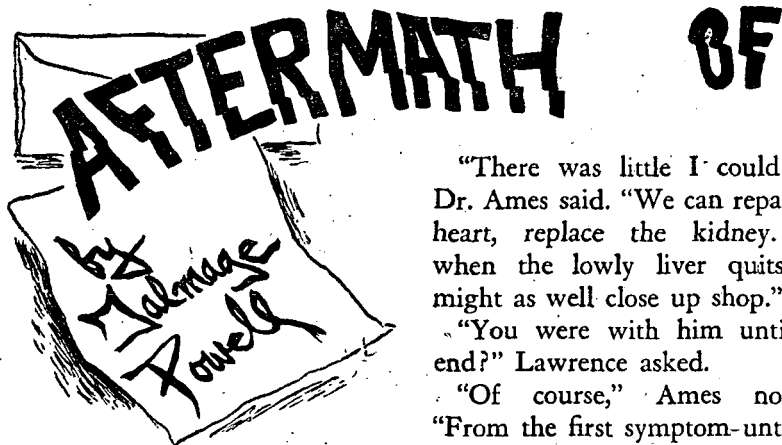


THE DISEASE has a jawbreaking technical name," Dr. Mallory Ames said. "But in layman's language, Nicky Colgren died of breakdown and malfunction of the liver. Liver failure, you might say."

Ames sighed heavily as he gave the news to Ronald Clary and

Clary's eyes were normally diamond-hard windows on a personality not easily shocked or dismayed. "I suppose," he mused, "I owe it to good old Nicky to write the obituary myself."

"It's difficult to think of him being gone," Lawrence said.



Hadley Lawrence. Lawrence, an attorney, had summoned his two friends to his office. It was early evening and the large office building had an air of desertion and desolation.

Managing editor of the city's leading newspaper, Clary stirred quietly as he lighted a cigar. A powerfully built, balding man,

"There was little I could do," Dr. Ames said. "We can repair the heart, replace the kidney. But when the lowly liver quits, we might as well close up shop."

"You were with him until the end?" Lawrence asked.

"Of course," Ames nodded. "From the first symptom-until the moment when I had to put my signature on the death certificate, I was in constant attendance. It was the least I could do for Nicky."

Lawrence moved slowly behind his desk and sat down. He was a dark, thin man, with the look of temperament in the fine lines of his face. The desk was massive, hand-rubbed walnut in keeping with the

rest of the large imposing office. "Old Nicky," he murmured, "no more bumbling for him, dubbing them off the tee or slicing his irons in the rough."

"He hadn't a bad life," Clary said. "Over fifty years of it. Ineffectual and slightly ridiculous at times, true. But with all that inherited wealth, he had a good, solid shield."

"He wasn't the same Nicky at the end," Ames said. "With the pudgy grin and little-boyishness gone, he was just a tired old man

DEATH

with a thin, graying mustache and pouches under his eyes."

"Liquor and women," Clary said, "and the parties he was always bustling around preparing for."

"His most serious interests," Lawrence agreed. "You know, when you get right down to it, he had nothing in common with us three. I wonder why he clung to us as friends?"

"We were his points of contact with a world that had more substance than his own," Clary said. "And I suppose it bolstered our own egos to have him around."

Ames nodded acceptance of the point Clary had made; then the

doctor turned to the attorney. "Hadley, why'd you call us down here?"

"I have a letter from Nicky," Lawrence opened a drawer in his desk. "It was written night before last and delivered to me by special messenger. Attached to it were instructions for the three of us to read it jointly in the event of Nicky's death."

Clary and Ames glanced at each other and drew involuntarily closer to the desk. Lawrence sat holding the white, sealed envelope for a moment. Then he picked up a thin, golden letter opener. The ripping of the envelope was inordinately loud and jarring in the silence that had come to the office.

Lawrence went pale as he skimmed over the letter.

"Come on, Hadley!" Clary snapped his fingers. "It was meant for all three of us."

"I'm not sure you want to hear it."

"I'm certain we do," Ames said. A robust, rather florid, stuffy looking man, the doctor glared briefly at his friend.

"Sure," Clary said. "Read it aloud, Hadley."

With another moment's hesitation, the attorney took a breath and began reading in a voice that faltered every now and then:

"Dear Pals,

"I suspect, from Mal's demeanor, that this mysterious liver ailment is going to knock me off. I should at least like to die from a man-sized cause. Instead—wouldn't you know it—the bumbling nitwit will expire from a fouled-up liver, of all things.

"Don't protest, friends. I didn't use the word nitwit lightly. I have known, since I was a kid smothered by governesses and nurses, that the word described me well. I know further that you have always secretly thought of me in precisely such terms.

"However, the ineffectual clown must have his say. If I impressed you none whatever in life, I shall do so in death.

"You believe you are married to respectable, moral women of great character. But the fact is I've been loved by the wife of one of you. I discovered a kind and degree of passion in her you never dreamed existed. On many occasions—at my whim and desire—she has come to me.

"So, friends, while there was an element of condescension in your friendship for me, I must assure you it was ill-founded. I cannot depart permanently as nothing more than the buffoon who was tolerated around the clubhouse and at the cocktail gathering.

"Instead, I prefer to die knowing I have assumed an importance in

your lives and an image in your minds it was never my privilege to enjoy during a lifetime that, I must confess, was most lonely, though not altogether frustrating.

"Most Sincerely,
"Nicky"

Hadley Lawrence dropped the letter to his desktop. An absolute silence held the three men as they stared at the letter.

Clary's face grew redder with each passing second. His upper and lower teeth made contact through his cigar. Ames lost all appearance of being the medical harbinger of hope.

Lawrence began trembling. "I know one thing—it couldn't have been Lucille he was talking about!"

Ames jerked his eyes up to glare at the lawyer. "Are you implying that Doris . . ."

"Or Maureen?" Clary demanded. He reached across the desk and grabbed Lawrence by the lapel. With an angry sound, Lawrence pulled away.

Lawrence stood at bay before the two men a moment. Nineteenth-hole jocularities might never have transpired between the three men. They stood with hackles up, memory of friendship growing dim.

"I'm not implying a thing," Lawrence said finally, straightening his jacket. "He referred to someone other than Lucille, that's all."

"I won't stand here and listen . . ." Clary began.

Ames reached and stopped Clary's fresh movement toward Lawrence.

"I suggest we be as objective about this as we can," Ames said.

"You're a doctor," Clary said. "You know how to be clinical. But I . . ."

"A man who runs an important newspaper should have the same sort of self control," Ames said. "So should a prominent attorney. Now—let's not play right into his hands."

A faint relaxation came to Lawrence's narrow shoulders. "Of course, you're right, Mal. Nicky hoped we'd react in just this way."

"Certainly. No doubt he visualized the scene and got some satisfaction from it."

"A shoddy way to die, if you ask me," Clary said.

Lawrence reseated himself. "Shoddy, yes. But I suppose you can't go through an entire lifetime, carrying the things Nicholas Colgren had inside of him, without it affecting you."

"The point is," Ames said, "what are we going to do about it?"

"Destroy the letter," Lawrence said.

"You can burn the paper," Clary said, "but you'll never destroy the content of the letter. It'll be with us

forever; we can't escape that."

Lawrence put his head in his hands and groaned. Clary lit a fresh cigar and went over and dropped into a chair. Ames stood disconsolate in the middle of the room, looking from one to the other of them.

He leaned across the desk, grasped Lawrence's shoulder, and shook it.

"Hadley . . . get a grip on yourself, man! And you too, Ronald. Get on your feet. On your feet, I said!"

When he had their full attention, Ames said, "We must face and accept this thing squarely, you know. We have no other choice. And then . . . then we must never speak of it again. What has happened in this office tonight must never go beyond it."

"You mean we let Nicky get away with it?" Clary demanded.

"What would you suggest doing to him?" Ames said.

"The rotten coward!" Lawrence's voice shuddered. "Knowing he would be out of our reach, beyond harm . . ."

"Mal," Clary said, "are you suggesting I look at my wife for the rest of my life without ever really knowing the truth?"

"It isn't what Nicky anticipated," Ames said. "It's the only way we can cross him."

Ames let his words sink in. Then he went on: "We all know the women in question, and we know that Nicky did have a certain boyish appeal, a unique charm. We can assume that he deliberately used every means at his disposal to cultivate the affair. And he had many years in which to do it. It made for a situation which in all probability will never recur. It's more than possible that the woman in question will never step out of line again, with Nicky gone."

"I've got to know!" Clary said. "I can't stand . . ."

He broke off. He stared at the other two men. His face colored. "Don't get me wrong! I know damn well my wife isn't the woman!"

"Then you just hang onto that belief," Ames said. "Nicky has given each of us the power to destroy himself. You remember it. It was what Nicky wanted."

Clary and Lawrence breathed heavily in the silence.

"You're right, of course," Clary said grudgingly.

"But it's going to be hard," Lawrence said, "looking at her across the breakfast table, seeing her before her mirror combing her hair out . . ."

"Regard it," Ames advised, "as the penance we must make for the faulty friendship we gave Nicky."

His words seemed to bring a feeling of finality into the office. The three became stiff and awkward as they regarded one another.

Ames turned abruptly and started toward the door. He paused, looked over his shoulder. "Meet you at the club usual time Sunday?"

Clary busied himself relighting his cigar. "As a matter of fact, I won't be able to play golf this weekend. My wife . . . There's an antique show she mentioned wanting to see."

Lawrence's hands moved about rapidly, doing nothing with the items on his desktop. "Been neglecting the roses," he murmured. "Guess I'd better do some cutting and spraying Sunday, and water the lawn."

Ames nodded, more to himself than to them. There was a brief glint of regret and loss in his eyes. Then he went quickly from the office.

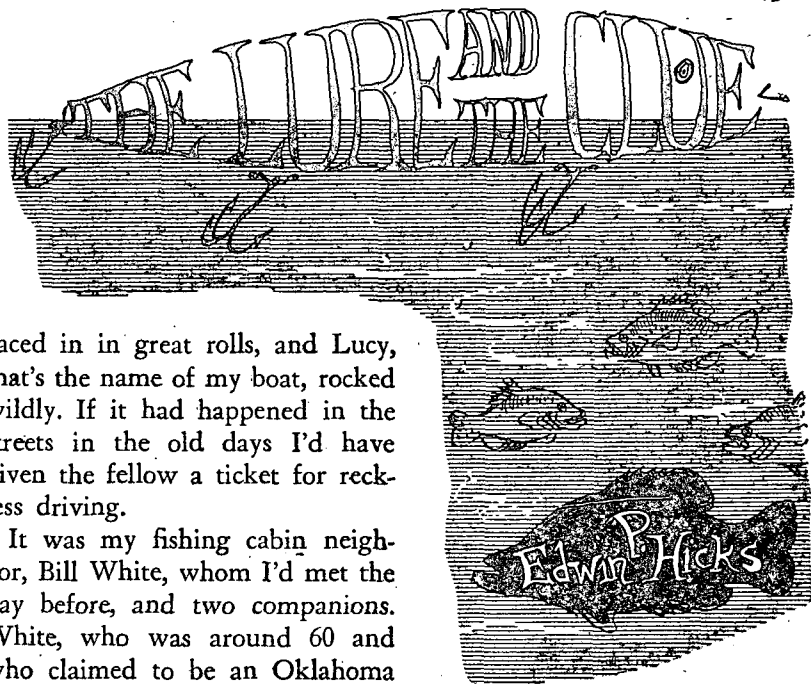
His footsteps echoed as he left the deserted building.

As he got into his car, he thought that it was too bad Clary and Lawrence had been involved. It had all been between him and Nicky, really, from the evening he'd returned early from the medical convention and followed Doris secretly to a certain motel.

Once a cop, always a cop, is a truism that may snap one out of the lethargy of retirement, and turn him into a conquering hero.

TURNING my boat around to head out of the cove, I saw the other boat bearing down and headed straight for me. It came with a rush, under the full power of a 40-horse outboard motor and never slackened speed until at the last second the big guy in the stern cut the motor completely. The waves

City oil man, was dressed like a dandy—red coat, red cap, and khakis. The man in the bow, medium sized and roughly dressed, was about 45. He held a pair of field glasses and grinned insolently at me, getting a kick out of the way my boat was rocking. My ex-police sense told me this gentle-



raced in in great rolls, and Lucy, that's the name of my boat, rocked wildly. If it had happened in the streets in the old days I'd have given the fellow a ticket for reckless driving.

It was my fishing cabin neighbor, Bill White, whom I'd met the day before, and two companions. White, who was around 60 and who claimed to be an Oklahoma

man was a cop-hater and dangerous.

"Hi there, Joe Chaviski," White greeted. "Meet my fishing partners, Frank Caprino and Jim Brown. Frank was watching you through the glasses and saw you pull out that big bass, and we thought we'd join you over here and see what you were using. Where is that bass? Let's see how big he is."

"Didn't know you fellows wanted him," I said. "I didn't need him to eat, so I turned him loose."

Brown swore. Caprino spat into the water.

"I don't understand you damn fellows who drive miles to fish, then when you luck into a big one turn him loose again," Caprino said with a sneer.

A policeman's blood doesn't boil easily. He's used to men spouting off. I ignored Caprino and looked Brown over. Here was a youngster who would be tough handling. He was young—in his early twenties—and he was big, at least 230 pounds, and probably would stand six feet three or four inches tall. His shoulders were the shoulders of a heavy-weight boxer, and his weight was sinewy bone and muscle. There was no fat on his entire frame. The boy was a perfect physical specimen.

Caprino was ready to kill at the

drop of a hat, and you knew what to expect; but Brown was the one who could do the most damage, because you wouldn't be sure what he would do. Brown's face was sun-tanned, but his eyes were blue. He looked like a big, friendly, innocent kid—a bit too innocent. Through bitter experience I had a great deal of respect for baby-faced youngsters. You never knew what a friendly faced juvenile delinquent like Brown would do.

I spoke to White. "I was just getting ready to pull out of here. You can have the cove if you want it."

Caprino chuckled as I started the motor. He dropped his field-glasses to the end of the leather thong about his neck and thrust his right hand beneath his coat, towards a bulge below his left shoulder. At that instant, White dropped a restraining hand on Caprino's arm, just like a man steadying a vicious dog that was about to leap on a stranger.

I was glad to get away from there and scooted clear across the lake to a forest of dead tree tops sticking out of the water. Here I searched for a small buoy-marker, bobbing on the surface, among the tree tops. This marker, a slab of wood, anchored by wire to the bottom, marked a crappie bed.

Finding the marker, I tied up, unlimbered a couple of cane poles,

lines and bobbers, baited with minnows, and began fishing for crappie. This was a lazy man's way of fishing. I stayed over the crappie bed for hours, mainly dozing, enjoying the warm October sun. The crappie began hitting about one-thirty in the afternoon. I pulled out crappie until I got tired, keeping only a few of the big slabs. Then in an hour or so the flurry was over, and the crappie went back to sleep and so did I.

As I dozed there, half awake, I dreamed about the past. I was thinking of my wife Lucy, for whom my boat was named. Lucy had been dead more than five years now. And I thought of Johnson and Sauer, wild young buckaroos, whom I had made into plain-clothesmen, although the effort nearly killed me. And, with something akin to physical force, I pushed back into their graves, the 11 men I had killed during my 30 years on the police force. Then I thought of Billy Hearston. Billy was my good friend.

He had broken in with me as a rookie patrolman—in those dim, dead days of long ago. I had the First to the Main Hotel Alley beat, and Hearston had the Alley to Thirteenth Street. We worked seven nights a week, in 12 hour shifts. If a policeman made any arrests, he had to appear in Mu-

nicipal Court next day to testify. A court appearance made one or two more hours in uniform, during the 24 hour day. Our pay was \$80 a month, but \$80 was good money in those days.

Day after day drunks had been wandering up on my beat. Day after day I walked them dutifully down the Main Hotel Alley and to the city jail—and appeared sleepy-eyed and red-faced next day in court.

One night it appeared there were going to be no drunks, and I was looking forward to grabbing a bite to eat and then just dying in my bed. I was that tired. Five minutes before off-duty time, a wobbly soul met me at the Alley. I grabbed the poor fellow by the shoulders and shook him. "Tell me," I bel-lowed, "why do you drunks always have to come on my beat?"

"Why—" said the intoxicated one, between hiccoughs, "that other cop down the street told me to come up here and report to you."

A great light dawned on me then. Next afternoon, right after 5 o'clock, just after I had started on duty for the night, I met Billy Hearston at the Main Hotel Alley. Billy was every bit as big a man as I was—about 245, and six feet tall. I walked straight up to him. "You so-and-so!" I yelled in his face.

"Whatta you mean Joe?" Billy

asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"Why the hell are you always sending your drunks over on my beat and making me lose two hours' sleep every day?" I slapped Billy with my open hand across the cheek so hard it sounded like a whip cracking.

Holding his ground, Billy returned the slap. For five minutes we engaged in a face-slapping exercise—both of us as stubborn as two young bull-calves butting heads in the pasture. We were still at it when Chief Ingersoll appeared and grabbed each of us by the coat collar.

"What are you two pups doing? Trying to kill each other?"

The Chief took us both over to his office, gave us a sizzling lecture on the dignity of our uniforms, threatened to fine us a month's salary, then sent us both back on the beat, grinning sheepishly.

It was a week later we learned that the Mayor, who lived in an apartment across the street, had seen the slapping incident and had called the police station: "Hurry over here Chief, before two of your policemen beat each other to death!"

Poor Billy had died of Japanese bullets on a South Pacific Island in 1944.

But all the time as I lazed away

there in the autumn sunlight, drinking in its warmth and haunted with a loneliness for Lucy—the Oklahoma dandy, Bill White, killer-type Hank Caprino, and the baby-faced young giant, Jim Brown, were in the back of my mind.

There was something wrong with that trio. I felt it—I knew it, and yet I knew also that criminals, gangsters, hoodlums, do not fish and hunt, and they do not enjoy the outdoors. And then I said to myself—Oh hell, Joe Chaviski, you're no longer a cop. But my mind was still a cop's mind.

The sunset was a scarlet band above the pines as I nosed my boat back into the cove where I had taken the lunker at sunrise.

Hank Caprino had reached for a rod that morning, fisherman or no fisherman. I hadn't seen the gun, but I had seen the movement, and I was just as sure as anything that he would have blasted me out of the boat if White hadn't restrained him. And here I was, clear away from base, without a sign of a firearm. I had left everything that would remind me of police work back at home.

I cast a big red-head surface plug about the shallows of the point, without success and then headed back for the landing, my cabin, a quick meal, and a soft bed. A

patch of light was showing beneath the drawn window shade in the cabin next to mine as I drove up, and the blare of a radio told me that White, Caprino, and Brown were at home. I hoped they would quickly knock it off and let me get some sleep.

But before I got inside, the baby-faced giant, Jim Brown, was there. "Mister Chaviski, come over and have a drink with us. A shot will do you good."

"No thanks Brown, I'm all worn out. Think I'll eat a bite and turn in."

"Aw come on, Chaviski, we caught some fish. Want to show them to you."

I followed the boy into the cabin. The place was thick with tobacco smoke, and the radio was loud enough to burst your ear drums. "Turn off that damn noise," shouted White, who appeared to be the only man in the room not drinking. When nobody stirred, White turned it off himself.

"Look, Mr. Chaviski, we followed your system and caught some good ones today," Brown said.

Caprino said something that was between a snarl and a laugh.

A fourth man came into the room from the kitchen. He was about 45, blond, six feet in height, even though caved in in the chest, and his long jaw ended in an un-

derthrust chin. His eyes were glazed and green, and through the thick tobacco smoke the newcomer looked like a walking cadaver. He had a heavy, black skillet in his hand, and the skillet was filled with smoking crappie. He piled the hot fish onto a platter on the table, and Caprino and Brown pounced on the fish with forks. The emaciated cook cackled: "Take yore time. There's another skillet full just like that one."

"Sit down," said White. "Sit down, Chaviski, and have supper with us."

I sat down, and a plate of fish, surprisingly well cooked, was placed before me.

All five of us pitched in and ate the fish greedily. I was as hungry as a bear myself, and the others appeared just as hungry.

"I didn't introduce you to our cook," said White, when the thin fellow had cleared the table and returned to the kitchen. "He's a sort of odd ball—not all here." White tapped his forehead. "But he's the best cook in seven states. Name's Lenny Hamm. Got a machine gun bullet through his chest at Omaha Beach."

"I didn't see him this morning," I said.

"Oh we picked him up later after he had cleaned up the cabin. He's not much of a fisherman, but

he likes to go out on the lake now and then when he's on a fishing trip."

"Well, thanks for the supper. It sure saved me a lot of work. Where did you get those crappie?"

"Right off the point where we saw you this morning. We went back to the dock and bought some surface plugs like you were using."

"You mean Luckies?"

"Yep. Same color, same size, and everything."

"Well, sometimes they hit over there. You never can tell. I'd have thought you'd have got them on minnows though."

"No, just what you were using this morning."

Back in my own cabin I got up a real head of steam. You don't catch crappie on big surface lures like a casting size Lucky and very seldom on the surface at all. When crappie hit an artificial lure it is something that looks like a small minnow flashing through the water, and usually a few feet down. But then I started to get drowsy. I'd get the news and turn in.

I turned on the radio and got rock and roll music on three stations. It wasn't time for the newscasts. I switched to the police calls—and instantly came alive. The Blakely City police and the Garland County Sheriff's office were keeping the airwaves hot. The

First National Bank at Blakely had been robbed at noon that day by four bandits who wore stocking cap masks. The four had gotten away cleanly with \$45,000 in cash, in a red convertible bearing a Texas license plate. The convertible had been found an hour later in the woods near the intersection of U.S. Highway 270 and a National Forest road about 25 miles north west of Blakely City, and at the bottom of a ridge a quarter of a mile south of the southern edge of Pine Valley Lake.

A four state hunt for the bank robbers was under way, but so far the officers were following a cold trail. I listened to the physical descriptions of the four. There was one tall, big man, two of medium height, while the description of the fourth varied. Some said he was tall, others said he was stooped. But black stocking cap masks had hidden the features of the bandits completely.

I turned off the radio, after a while, switched off the lights in the cabin, and walked back to the lodge dining room. A couple of fishermen and their wives were watching a fight on TV. Sam Willoughby, operator of the lodge, was tidying up behind the fountain. Jim Taylor, who was in charge of the dock, was at the end of the counter, eating a late dinner.

I moved over to the counter and chose a stool next to Taylor. I ordered a dish of vanilla ice cream. I love vanilla ice cream.

"The four fellows in the cabin next to mine, I was just wondering if they drove off anywhere in their car during the day?" I asked Sam, as I dug into the ice cream.

Sam wiped at the spot of water on the counter. "You too?" he said, low and under his breath.

"What do you mean?"

"Half a dozen law-men have been over here off and on since that bank robbery in Blakely City. They searched every cabin this afternoon, inside and underneath—yours included—and every car, and they found nothing."

"No guns?"

"Nothing but a .22 rifle for shooting snakes and plinking around, like a lot of fishermen take with them. Your friends had a twenty-two."

"What about their car, has it been anywhere today?"

"Not that I know of. Taylor says all four of them been out on the lake all day fishing, the same as everyone else. Isn't that right, Jim?"

Taylor nodded. "They went out in two boats. First time they ever took two boats since they been here."

"What I can't understand," I said, grinning, "is the way they

catch crappie. They had me over to eat tonight, and they said they caught all their crappie on big top water lures—large size Luckies. Never heard of such a thing before."

Taylor laughed. "Those poor devils. They have been here since the first of the week and haven't caught fish one. So a fellow with more crappie than he could use give them a mess today, when they come in about the same time to the dock, about 4 p.m. It was that guy on the left over there watching the fights. He'll tell you about it."

"Now that's more like it," I said. "I knew good and well they hadn't taken them the way they said. You mean they were out there all day today and didn't catch a thing."

"Never saw any harder fishermen in my life. Went out right after you did—the three of them in one boat. Come back in about three hours and rented another boat, like I said. Said they were going to take their cook out. In a few minutes he came down to the boat—a tall guy, bent over and sickly looking. They kidded a lot about what a fisherman he was, but he took it all right. He and the dark, mean looking guy got in one boat, and the big young fellow and the old duffer from Oklahoma City

got in the other. Both boats headed back up the lake the way you went. Didn't come off the lake until around four or a little after, like I said, and they were really riding the cook. They said they were transferring their ice box from one boat to the other, and the cook let it slip, and it sank 50 feet down in the water, beer and all."

Taylor paid his bill, picked up a toothpick, and ambled out of the restaurant. "Something about those four neighbors of yours you don't like, Joe?" Willoughby asked, low enough that Taylor couldn't hear.

"Yes," I said. "Maybe it's because I can't get out of the habit of thinking I'm still a policeman. You know you can't shake off 30 years wearing a badge and gun in two months' time."

"I guess that's right."

"Ever see these four fellows here before?"

"No," Sam said, "never did."

"When the law searched their cabin and car, you sure they didn't find anything—anything at all?"

"They were clean," said Willoughby, "except for that little .22 rifle, like I told you. Usually they took that with them in the boat, but they hadn't today. There wasn't a thing out of the way—nothing."

I sidled over towards the crappie fisherman, who was watching the

last round of a fight on television. The man looked up and nodded, but I waited for the round to end and the decision.

"What time did the crappie start hitting for you today?"

"About 11 o'clock—clear up until one-thirty or two, I would judge. Couple of fellows came by about noon. I asked them what time it was—always leave my watch in the cabin to keep from dunking it. They said it was 12 o'clock. The poor duffers hadn't had a nibble all day—though the Lord knows why. Later I ran into them at the dock as they were coming in and gave them eight or ten nice crappie."

It took me some time to go to sleep. The guys in the next cabin were hotter than a firecracker, it seemed to me, and yet they had established alibis all over the lake. They couldn't have robbed the Blakely bank. When you are on the lake fishing, you aren't robbing banks, and that definitely was where these four were.

Oh well, maybe I was getting old—brain softening up or something. Everything in me was screaming that I was sitting right on top of a bank robbery that I ought to blow wide open—and yet nothing in the whole business fit together. The four had been on the lake, same as I. They had been

seen all over the lake, and their car hadn't left the fishing camp all day. So I turned off my feeble mind and went to sleep.

The sun was already up when I hit the lake next morning. I had overslept an hour, and the old Navy wound in the left hip was paining me, and that was a sign that a spell of weather was on its way. The eastern sky was red too. "Red at morn, sailor's warn—Red at night, sailor's delight." The bass had read the signs too, long before I had. They were still sulking, as they had been at sunset. Oh well, if the white caps started rising on the lake I would pull off and go to the cabin and get some sleep, or I'd go over to Blakely City and nose around the police station and see if they had any sign—any line on the bank robbers.

I used the paddle to edge silently into the cove, and then threw everything I had in the tackle box at the bass, but they wouldn't hit. Then, throttle at a crawl, I started pulling out of the cove, changing to an eel and jig combination as I did so, intending to fish the deep water off the points. Something hit me right between the eyes—figuratively.

I yanked the boat around and sent it back towards the center of the cove. Yes, I hadn't been seeing

things. One hundred feet out from the shore line was a floating wooden marker—a fresh pine slab, about three feet long, with a bright copper wire attached and leading down into the depths!

Such a marker is frequently used by fishermen or lake-men for various reasons—to mark a good fishing spot, or to serve as a direction guide, or as a depth marker. *Yesterday morning this marker hadn't been there.* It could have been there yesterday evening, because it was late when I passed that way, and I could have gone within a few feet of it without seeing it.

I edged the boat towards the marker and caught hold of the copper wire and began heaving on it. Something tremendously heavy was attached to it on the bottom. I put my back into the work, and the thing began to move. I began bringing it up slowly, while the boat careened over almost to the gunwale.

Hand over hand I brought up the length of bright copper wire, some 25 feet of it. Then, several feet down, I saw it—shining metal. It was a large fishing ice-box, with the lid pad-locked and attached to the ice box by wire was a rubberized bag!

Puffing and grunting I got the whole into the boat, wire and all, and sat there panting like a por-

poise. The whine of a speeding outboard came to me, from the center of the lake. I turned to see a boat headed directly towards me and cutting a great swath through the surface. It was time to get moving.

By the time I had the motor started and underway, the other boat was within two hundred yards. I headed up the shore line, throttle open, picking up speed and going hell for leather. The other boat came right after me, wide open, spray flying wide. Three of my cabin neighbors were in that boat, and they were after me and no question about it. By the time I was full speed, the other boat had cut the distance to 100 yards.

We went up the north shore line, with my 25 horse outboard now holding its own. White and Caprino were waving their hands and yelling. The roar of the motors made it impossible to hear what they said, but I knew damn well what they meant. If they caught me I'd wind up at the bottom of the lake, wire and icebox attached but no buoy to mark the spot where the body lay.

Something that wasn't a bumble bee hit the top of the ice box and ricocheted in a screaming whine out over the lake. They were using that .22 rifle I bent my 250 pound anatomy down as far as I could be-

hind the motor and kept pouring on the coal, running towards a small island ahead. Passing the island, I made a 90 degree turn sharply to port, then reversed my course completely, ducking around the island and headed back towards the center of the lake.

The maneuver, which caught White and company by surprise, gained a little distance, but not too much. The wind was freshening, and out in the middle of the lake tiny white-caps were showing. I aimed at a rocky point on the opposite shore, a mile and a half away, watching the surface ahead closely, and thanking the good Lord that I had filled the gasoline tank before starting out that morning.

A minute passed, and I sighted what I was looking for, another marker, a block of wood bobbing on the surface and attached to a wire. I made a turn to starboard around this marker, doubling as if I intended to reverse my course again.

The pursuing boat turned instantly and cut across the arc of my course, thus gaining a full 50 yards on me. Two bullets whistled by my ear. Caprino was coming close!

And then it happened—what I had been praying for! The boat that was chasing me smashed into a low water rock bar with a re-



sounding crash, and the three occupants went flying through the air. They came up one by one, sputtering and cursing, Caprino, Hamm, then White—to find themselves up to their waists in water, a good half mile from shore. Their boat with shattered bow had capsized, and the .22 rifle had been lost in the smash-up.

I cut my motor and circled back, to idle about 50 yards from the bedraggled trio. "Now, you're marooned on a low-water bar, and I'd advise you to stay right where you are and not try moving around unless you're darn good Channel swimmers. The water is 50 feet deep in every direction from where you are, and the white caps are rising. Stay right there and be good boys and maybe you can keep your noses above water."

"But I can't even swim!" bawled

White. He looked really terrified.

"Now ain't that just too bad!"

At the dock I got Jim Taylor to help lift the heavy ice box and the rubberized bag out of the boat and told him to keep watch over it.

At the lodge I put in a call to the Blakely City police department. "Yep, all of it!" I said. "They used boats instead of a get-away car, and they put the money in a rubberized sack inside a fishing ice-box. They put their tommy guns and their other heavy artillery in another rubber sack, attached everything to a floating surface marker by wire, and sank the whole business into the lake—to stay there until things cooled off. They probably dumped their masks and the clothes they used in the hold-up into the water too, weighted down with rocks—and had their fishing clothes on under what they took off.

"Yeah, Captain, they're stranded out on a reef helpless as flies on fly-paper—three of them. Yeah, I'll have the fourth one hog-tied and ready for special delivery when you get here. Take all the time you want."

Sam Willoughby was goggle eyed. "The big guy is down at the cabin. I saw him just a few minutes ago." Sam took a shotgun from under the counter and handed me a .45 automatic.

"Put those guns down," I said.

"Guns get people killed. You stay out of this Sam. Not a gun on the place in that cabin. You said so yourself. I think I'm still man enough to take him."

"But you're not as young as he is, and he's as big as you are, Joel!"

"This will separate the men from the boys, Sam."

I limped down to the cabin, trying to fit all the pieces together on the way. I'm not too fast with the think tank. Anything obvious takes me about 30 minutes to comprehend when my brain is working real good. But it came to me on the way. The cook, Lenny Hamm, who didn't go out with the three of them the first time on the lake the day of the robbery, already was in Blakely City. It was he who stole the get-away car and he parked it in the woods over the ridge from the lake. Then, at the appointed time, he had met them on the lake shore, and they had taken him back to a point near their cabin. He had left the boat then, gone to the cabin, while the three others returned to the dock and rented another boat and motor. They waited at the dock, and Hamm came down to them after apparently just having finished his cabin chores.

The four then sped out across the lake in the two boats, heading for known fishing points, but once out of sight of the landing they

had turned and headed for the south shore. There they beached the boats, picked up their artillery from some shore-line cache, made their way the quarter of a mile over the ridge to the hidden car—and had gone into Blakely right on schedule to rob the bank at 12, noon. They had then raced back with the bank loot, abandoned the car, climbed back over the hill, and soon were back in their boats. They then made it a point to be seen all over the lake, lying to the crappie fisherman that it was noon—the time of the bank robbery—when it was around 2 o'clock. The rest everybody knew.

I didn't knock on my neighbor's fishing cabin door—just turned the knob and walked right in. Maybe I couldn't handle the youngster, but I wanted to try. Brown read my intentions and didn't waste a word. He came off the cot like a charging bull, throwing a punch from right field that tickled my left ear as it just missed. I sank a right hook up to my wrist in his middle, judo-chopped him across the back of his neck with my left hand, and came up under his sagging chin with a knee. It was real pretty for an old man. Jim Brown wouldn't think I was old at all. That is, he wouldn't think so when he woke up and met all those Blakely cops.

The quickest way to a man's heart, we're told, is through his stomach, a cliché that was completely lost on this overconfident romanticist.

It was always just another business operation with Jerome Staley, yet he had to admit to himself that from the very first correspondence with Veronica he had felt something different. Something in her tone set her apart from the others. There was none of the whine, none of the deep-grained self-pity that permeated all their letters like the hollow ring of a gong, echoing

the loneliness. They all showed it, whether they knew it or not, and he had come to expect it, and to lay upon it.

But it was missing in Veronica's letters. There was sorrow there, of course, but it was of a by-gone

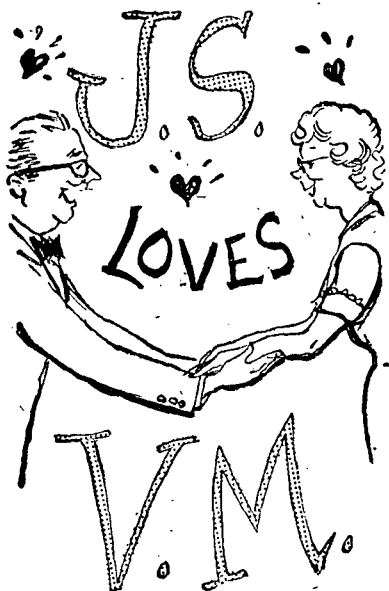


sort, not a clinging thing that could not be shed.

The second letter, for instance. My dear Jerome,

I hope you will forgive my abominable lack of propriety in addressing you by your Christian name, but I have a strange feeling that our correspondence is not destined to be some ephemeral thing, and so I call you Jerome.

I thought of you last evening as I prepared for bed. I have grown accustomed to solitude, as I imagine you yourself have. Your Edna, as you



wrote, has been gone two years now, and my James nearly eighteen months. One can adapt to such things when the need arises and when one does not give way to weaknesses.

But your letters disturb me. They break against my adopted wall of reserve like stormy seas on a barren shore, and reach out to rekindle suppressed longings. So, as I sat at my dressing table I took out both your letters, read them again, and gave thanks for the whim of fate that brought us together through the club . . .

Staley smiled, though not from any feeling of conceit. His letters were most carefully designed to do exactly as they had done, to bring out the precise feelings Veronica McCullough had described with such poignancy.

That had been her second letter. The first, quite naturally, had exhibited the shyness and embarrassment that was obvious in all first contacts. They all seemed to feel that there was something a little vulgar or common in having to meet someone, a stranger, through the machinations of other strangers, the personnel of the friendship club. The very name of this particular club had repulsed Staley—The Senior Citizens Friendship League. The term 'senior citizen'

had quite obviously been coined by the devil. Nonetheless, Staley could not take the chance of working through the same organization twice, and so he had to put up with minor annoyances.

Though he was no academic master of psychology, Jerome Staley knew that the shyness and embarrassment could be overcome by proper handling. It was a third item, inertia, that often was more difficult. Older people have a tendency to remain on the same heading, often whether it is to their liking or not. It is the way they know, and even after the first tentative try at breaking away, they will draw back quickly, as if from an unseen flame, and try to circumvent new and strange contacts. More important to Staley than to be able to quote from Freud or Jung or Adler, was the practical ability to crack firmly through this shell.

His stock second letter was specifically molded so as gently to brush aside this reticence and the shadows of suspicion, to establish an aura of trust, a feeling of their being, as it were, in the same boat.

Once more, it had accomplished its purpose.

And now, in letter #3, the possible personal meeting would be touched upon. Lightly at first, as though the possibility, in view of

the distance separating them, was hardly a probability at this point. It simply served to broach the subject. Letter #3 drew an appropriate reply, four sanguine pages supporting the hope of a meeting, and soon.

The fourth and fifth letters carried it forward. Almost unconsciously, it was now *Dearest Jerome*, and *My darling Veronica*. Photographs passed in the mails.

The stage was now set. The leading man waited confidently in the wings. He penned letter #6 in his bold script, #6, which he fondly thought of as his literary *coup de grace*, the missive which effectively put them out of their suffering by bringing Jerome Staley onstage, in person:

My darling Veronica,

With your photograph before me, I sit here dumbly, like a smitten schoolboy experiencing the very first joyous and mysterious pangs of love. Yes, *love!* For I would be but lying to myself were I not to say it outright.

But, alas, I am not that schoolboy, for he sees time stretching before him in all its wondrous vastness. While I—and you—have reached a point close by that far side, the side he cannot so much as glimpse. We are almost within sight of

that pale Specter. Time cannot be hoarded, it must be lived. And to be alone, to be denied the object of one's love, is to be denied life itself.

I fly to your side, my Veronica! I arrive at 5:00 p.m., on Wednesday. If I am not welcome, you have but to say so.

Your,

Jerome

This was the letter that invariably occupied the place of honor beneath the ribbon binding the pack. It was infallible. The reply came, tersely passionate, via Western Union.

She met him at the airport and his first impression was one of near-disbelief. He recognized her immediately, and she him. As she came to him through the crowd, smiling, Jerome was suddenly aware that the picture she had sent him simply did not do her justice. It was strange indeed, for it had always been precisely the opposite, flagrantly touched-up likenesses that were not likenesses at all. Wrinkles painted out, double-chins removed, baggy eyes firmed, dewlaps miraculously absorbed, thin lips made full. But Veronica was beautiful, from the top of tastefully coiffured white hair to the tips of her spike-heeled feet.

"Jerome!"

"Veronica!"

She stopped two paces before him and tilted her head. She smiled again. "Jerome."

He gave his head a little shake. "Veronica."

He held out his hands, palms up, and she extended hers, palms down. Their fingers touched.

"It's . . . it's almost as if this were a reunion, my dear," she said. Her voice was soft and pleasant, with none of the unintentional harshness, the lost inflection, the catarrhish tones that often accompany age.

"It is, my sweet. We met long ago, in my dreams." He surprised himself by the utterance. He had never used that line before, in fact, he had said it completely ad lib, and it did not even have a corny ring to it under the circumstances.

They took a cab into the city, holding hands, talking as freely and easily as if they had known each other for years. She had reserved a room for Jerome at her own hotel, which was not expensive nor was it inexpensive, but quietly comfortable. He felt a certain relief at this, as he tipped the bellboy. Edna had passed away two years ago, and the \$30,000 she had left in insurance and property was down to five thousand or so, and Staley was not a man who liked to live on short rations.

He turned, smiling, and took

Veronica's hands. "We shall celebrate tonight in the grand style, my dear!" He looked quickly at his watch. "Can you be ready in an hour?"

"I can be ready in half an hour, Jerome. You have no idea how I've looked forward to this!"

He had an idea, but he did not express it. Instead, he showed her to the door, kissed her hand, and began to prepare for a whirlwind courtship.

And it was exactly that. Staley, from experience in depth, knew full well when the moment was right. He knew, in addition, that at the ages he and Veronica had reached passions do not blaze; rather, they simmer. Veronica, by his estimate, was simmering properly at exactly nine-fifteen that evening as they danced. Very quietly, very courteously, very expertly he whispered a marriage proposal into her ear. She accepted, gracefully and demurely.

They were married in a small chapel in a quiet ceremony. Neither had the necessary friends or relatives to warrant a large church wedding, but neither wanted one of those coldly commercial weddings, which Jerome likened to the coupling of two gondola cars in a freight yard, with a switch engine in attendance.

The young minister finished ty-

ing the knot, and as he concluded with the admonition to all men urging them to refrain from putting it asunder, Jerome felt his newest bride's gentle pressure on his arm.

"I'm so happy, Jerome," she whispered, smiling up at him radiantly. "I am so very, very happy!"

"And I, my love," he replied, somewhat astonished at the realization that he truly meant it.

For a while he felt a vague disquiet, wondering at what seemed to be happening to him. But by the time they returned to the hotel, where they had checked out of the two smaller rooms and merged into a larger suite, complete with a kitchenette, the feeling had vanished entirely.

There was a tacit agreement that there would be no carrying of the bride over the threshold, but an iced bottle of champagne awaited them inside, compliments of the hotel management.

As Jerome poured, his thoughts wandered to his last marriage. Edna, broad and square as an ox in a box, had undergone a complete metamorphosis as soon as the nuptial formalities were over. Her facade fell away, the smiling, absurdly coy face became a visage of determination. She had looked on Jerome, literally, as a dispeptic sculptor might regard a faulty

block of marble, something highly imperfect, which nonetheless would be hammered and pounded upon until it was shaped to suit. It had been a genuine pleasure for Jerome when the time came to remove Edna. In fact, if the act could have been done twice, he would have done so with alacrity.

"Jerome?"

"Eh?" He turned quickly from the hotel window, where he was re-living Edna's spectacular six-story plunge, and saw Veronica smiling at him. "Oh, forgive me, my darling," he said, moving to her. "I was . . . well, the past will not be done with, will it?"

She looked at him curiously, and then she lifted her champagne. "It will take time. For both of us."

During the first weeks of his marriage to Veronica, Staley felt as if he were growing younger. There was a spring to his step, his eyes shone with vigor, and whenever Veronica went out alone he found himself waiting expectantly for her return.

When a month had gone by—with the swiftness of a dove—Jerome began to wonder. A month was the longest any of them had lasted, and then—it was Matilda if memory served him correctly—only because he had been stricken with a virus shortly after the wedding and had found it expedient

to keep her alive until after his own recovery.

But even as the fifth week came and went, he found that he was not even making plans for Veronica. She seemed more beautiful every day, her attentiveness did not waver, she made no effort at all to change him, and they often held hands, as ingenuously as any young lovers. And her cooking, to borrow from a younger generation, was out of this world. Never—even in the finest restaurants, and Staley had patronized the finest in his time—never had he tasted such chicken timbale.

But he worried, he worried a great deal. One evening as they sat by candlelight in a little Italian place, he gazed at Veronica over his wine glass. His face grew serious.

"Does it ever frighten you? Happiness?"

"Frighten me?" She shook her head. "I don't understand. Why should happiness frighten one? It should be the opposite."

He smiled wanly. "Then perhaps it is because I am happier than you."

Veronica laughed then. "This is a side of you I haven't seen before, Jerome." She tilted her head, her eyes twinkling. "Is my young husband beginning to grow old?"

The idea had a sudden novel

appeal to him. Perhaps she had just hit on it in a moment of jest. He had always been realist enough to admit to the existence of anything, was never one to bury his head in the sand, no matter what confronted him. He had often had to cope with the unswerving attitude of older women, the dogged pursuit of the established ways. Perhaps here—with himself—he had failed to recognize it.

"It's strange, Veronica," he said. "A man my age, to him any change in the way of life to which he has grown accustomed, even if that change is for the better, is extremely difficult to adapt to."

She no longer reflected the amusement of a moment before. She simply nodded, sipped her wine, and said, "That's not exclusively a trait of older men, my dear."

Time slipped smoothly past, and occasionally Jerome would tell himself, very firmly, that he would do it soon. But tomorrow never seemed to come. This perfect blending of tastes, of likes and dislikes, this rapport that had undeniably existed from that very first letter, was a hard thing to break away from. Oftentimes they seemed to think as one. While listening to music or reading, one of them would make some casual remark, seemingly with no possible

relevance to the other's thoughts. But the thread would be picked up, the idea carried along as if they had been talking of it for some time.

Yet, Staley's way of life pulled him in the opposite direction. The spots of the leopard—especially the *old* leopard—are notoriously difficult to change. Staley knew this. He knew it well, and he knew it applied to him as well as others. From time to time he would try to convince himself that this was some sort of illusion, that his attachment for Veronica was not as strong as it seemed, that he was tiring of her.

But he wasn't. The attachment was real, and it was growing stronger, not weaker, and attachment was the one thing in life he had never sought. In fact, he had long actively opposed it.

The second month went into the past. "This has been a happy time in my life, Jerome," Veronica told him. "It's almost . . . almost as if . . ."

He looked up from the newspaper he was reading. "Almost as if what?"

She tossed the question aside with a shake of her head. "Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all. We are going to the concert tonight, aren't we? It's Mozart, you know. I love Mozart!"

Jerome folded his paper and sighed lightly. He too loved Mozart.

When the third month had come and gone, he knew that the situation would never arrive at a propitious time. He would never grow tired of her, nor she of him. They would go through the remaining years hand in hand . . .

And that was not what he wanted. It never had been, it never would be.

He would be gentle. There would be no pain. Veronica would simply go to sleep and never wake up. Who could ask a better end? Who could offer a better end? In fact, when you got right down to it, what could be a more positive act of love?

They went to another concert the following week. Beethoven. They both loved Beethoven, and when they returned to the suite both Jerome and Veronica still felt the lingering, soul-deep stirrings of the music. It would be the ideal night for it. He had obtained the poison the previous week, and now, as Veronica prepared for bed, he poured it into the decanter of port, from which she almost invariably drank a small glass before retiring.

She was humming a theme from the *Moonlight Sonata*. "Would you like your glass of wine, darling?"

he called from the livingroom.

"The concert was wonderful, darling, didn't you think so? You're so fond of Beethoven."

"Yes. Absolutely fabulous. Shall I bring your wine?"

"Thank you . . . wait . . . no. No, I really don't think I shall have it tonight. The music was intoxicating!"

He felt a sudden surge of relief as he replaced the glass stopper in the decanter. It would allow another day.

In her nightgown and robe, Veronica appeared at the door, smiling. "I think I shall cook chicken timbale tomorrow night! Would you like that, darling?"

"I should positively love that, my sweet," he said, pushing the decanter to the back of the sideboard. Twenty-four hours more, and once again things would be normal. Life, as he knew it, would resume.

Jerome kissed his wife warmly as they went to bed, and Veronica returned the kiss with equal ardor.

The air conditioned suite was an oasis after the intolerable heat of the cemetery. It was done, at last. The service had been nice, considering the cost, and despite the heat. Perhaps, in a way, the heat had been an ally, speeding the funeral as it had. Grief—real grief—was

an unaccustomed experience, and the sooner done with the better. Still, there was no denying it this time, there was a definite feeling of loss. Could it have been a mistake, an irremediable mistake, this time? Had age been given its proper due? Did not the final onslaught of time bring with it a need for quiet and congenial companionship? It had existed. The bond had been more than formal, it had been real.

It was over. Past. And it had been without pain, which was a consolation in itself. No need to dwell upon it further, for business was business and somewhere a new mate was waiting, waiting for that letter that reached slyly into the heart. In fact, the correspondence this time had given rise to new ideas, new approaches. There had been a noticeable talent there.

Funny, Veronica thought as she pushed back the black veil, how all of them had been so inordinately fond of her chicken timbale. She shook off her thoughts, and pausing only long enough to pour herself a much-needed glass of the port, she began to compose a letter of loneliness to another senior citizens club.

Senior citizens . . . she had always despised the phrase. She often wondered what sort of idiot invented it.

One who adopts "the double standard" for himself may find that, like a swinging door, it can move in two directions.

IT COULD BE



FATAL

THE FIRST CALL came on a Friday, at two o'clock in the morning.

The maid, awakened Boyce Harper and told him the caller had said it was urgent.

"What is it, Boyce?" asked his wife, Jean, from the twin bed next to his.

"I don't know." He pushed himself up from the pillow and took the extension the maid was holding. "Hello," he said sleepily.

"Mr. Boyce Harper? This is Carmichael Hospital calling. Is your mother Mrs. Eugenie Harper?"

"Yes. What is it? What's hap-

pened?" He sat up now in alarm.

"I'm afraid she's been in an accident, Mr. Harper. Can you get down here right away?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said Boyce, already getting out of bed. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I don't think we'd better waste

any time right now, Mr. Harper," the caller replied. "It's pretty serious. Just come to the receiving desk when you get here."

"Certainly," said Boyce. "I'll get there as quickly as I can."

His face had drained white by the time he replaced the receiver. "It's mother," he said to his wife. "She's been in some kind of accident."

"I'll go with you," said Jean, starting to get up.

"Don't bother," Boyce said coldly. "You don't like mother; you never have. This is no time to start pretending you do."

"All right," his wife said, "have it your way." She drew the covers back over her.

Harper dressed quickly and drove across town to Carmichael Hospital. When he arrived at the receiving desk, his hands were trembling and his stomach was jerking nervously. "I'm Boyce Harper," he said. The hospital clerk looked at him incongruously.

"Who?"

"Boyce Harper," he said impatiently. "My mother was brought here after an accident. They said I was to come right over."

"They?" said the clerk, frowning. "Who do you mean?"

"Now look," Boyce said hotly, "somebody called me an hour ago and said you had my mother here in serious condition and—"

"What's your mother's name?" the clerk interrupted.

"Eugenie Harper. Mrs. Eugenie Harper."

The clerk flipped through a cardex file. "I'm sorry but I don't have that name on the patient list. Maybe it was another hospital—"

"No, no, it wasn't another hospital, it was this hospital. They said Carmichael Hospital."

"Well, I'm sorry, but if her name isn't in the patient index—"

"Let me speak to whoever's in charge here," Boyce demanded.

Thirty minutes later Boyce had been convinced by the hospital's chief resident that his mother was not then nor had ever been in Carmichael Hospital. Completely confused, it now occurred to Boyce to telephone his mother's house to see if she was there. She was—sound asleep, her housekeeper said. She had been in all evening.

Boyce stepped out of the booth and stood fuming in the hospital lobby. What a dirty, rotten trick to pull, he thought angrily. Who could be sadistic enough to do a thing like that to him? He swore softly and left the hospital.

Outside in the parking lot he found his right front tire flat. A thin four-inch nail had been driven into the casing.

And that had been the result of the first call.

Boyce Harper was a big man; big of body, big of face. He was handsome, with clean-cut features and dark, wavy hair slashed with steel gray. He had an engaging smile and an impressive manner. His bearing, his carriage, his dress, were all faultless.

At forty-one, Boyce was considered more than just successful. He operated a thriving real estate business and prided himself on being a self-made man. Actually, however, no description could have been farther from the truth. If anything had made Boyce Harper, it was his wife's money and influence. Jean Harper was a successful lawyer. She had enjoyed a fantastic rise in the legal profession and might one day have been seriously considered for a judgeship. She had been a dedicated career woman, with no time for marriage. Then one day she decided to buy a house.

Boyce Harper had been the realty salesman who handled the transaction.

Jean had been the type of woman who was tailor-made for the Boyce Harper smile, the Boyce Harper manner, the polished personality. She bought the house—and Boyce Harper.

It wasn't long after they were married that Boyce began to capitalize on Jean. He used her money and he used her contacts. He began

to build the Prestige Realty Company, Boyce Harper, President. He started becoming a big man, and he loved the part. Somehow it seemed right to Boyce that he should wear fine clothes and drive a fine car and rub elbows with fine people. He just seemed right for the role. In addition, he thoroughly enjoyed all the fringe benefits his position brought—the extra cash, the extra luxuries, the extra women. Particularly the extra women. Boyce Harper was living.

Then, with that first phone call, things began happening.

Exactly one week after the Carmichael Hospital incident, Boyce Harper was once again rudely awakened in the dead of night. This time it was not a simple telephone call. This time it was the eerie shriek of sirens, the glare of searchlights, the sounds of shouting voices and breaking glass.

Boyce leaped out of bed, his blood turning cold. Smoke! He smelled smoke!

He hurried out of the bedroom, giving no thought to the safety of his sleeping wife. The lights were on downstairs and he saw the maid talking with two rubber-coated firemen in the foyer. He ran downstairs.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"All under control now," said one of the firemen. "Just some dead

brush out back. A lot of smoke but not much fire. It could have blown into one, though. Lucky you called us when you did."

"But—I didn't call you," Boyce said, frowning.

"Oh? Well, must have been one of your neighbors then. Say, we're sorry we had to break your library windows like we did. It was hard to tell where all the smoke was coming from, and of course we can't take any chances."

Boyce shook his head dumbly. "No—no, of course not."

"Fraid we'll have to write you a citation for all that dry brush, though," said the other fireman. "It should have been cleaned out."

"But I never saw any dry brush out there," Boyce protested. "I don't know anything about it."

The fireman shrugged. "Sorry. It's on your property. And it's a violation."

"Okay, okay," Boyce said disgustedly. "Just give it to the maid."

He left them in the foyer and went into the library. Broken glass littered the floor near the French doors. Cold night air was blowing into the room. He went over to the bar and poured himself a double portion of Scotch. His hand was trembling as he raised the glass to his lips. He hoped the liquor would calm his quaking stomach.

"Probably one of those crank cli-

ents of yours," he accused his wife at breakfast the next morning. "I can't think of anybody else carzy enough to do a thing like that."

"Oh, I don't know," Jean said coolly. "Maybe it was one of your discarded girlfriends looking for a little revenge."

"That's not funny," Boyce snapped.

"No, it isn't," she replied in a now icy voice. She threw her napkin down and left the table.

Boyce finished the meal alone. To hell with her, he thought. Let her think what she wanted. She was no further use to him anyway. He was made now; he didn't need her. If it wasn't for the publicity, the stigma attached to it, he'd discuss divorce with her. She probably wanted one as badly as he did. But he was afraid it would hurt the business. With prestige at stake one could not be too careful. He could not take a chance of blowing the whole thing now.

After breakfast Boyce left the house and drove to his office. "Fix me a Bromo," he told his secretary first thing upon arrival. "My breakfast isn't settling."

"Yes, Mr. Harper. Incidentally, there was a call earlier about the Mitchell property. The message is on your desk. You said you wanted to handle that listing personally."

"Yes, I do. Thanks."

Boyce found the message. It was from a Mr. Pierce and had a number for him to return the call. He dialed the number. Presently a voice answered: "Harry Pierce speaking."

"Boyce Harper, Mr. Pierce. I understand you were inquiring about the Mitchell Building?"

"Yes, I was. I represent a group of businessmen who are interested in a building about that size. If we can work out a price, I am prepared to make a definite commitment at once. Can we get together this morning?"

"Well—" Boyce said hesitantly, "it's pretty short notice."

"I realize that, of course, and ordinarily I wouldn't press the matter, but I'm due in St. Louis tonight and my plane leaves at two. And since I am authorized to close the deal myself, I thought you might—"

"By all means, Mr. Pierce," Boyce said at once, sensing a quick sale of the quarter-million dollar property. "I'll be glad to accommodate you."

"Fine, fine. You can show me the property today, then?"

"Certainly. Suppose I meet you in the building manager's office in an hour. That soon enough?"

"Yes, that'll be fine."

"You'll find parking space in the rear if you're driving," Boyce add-

ed, already going into the merits of the building.

"Very good," said Harry Pierce, "one hour then."

Boyce hung up just as his secretary brought in the Bromo. "Postpone my appointments for this morning, Miss Lewis," he told her. "I'll be over at the Mitchell Building all morning."

Forty minutes later Boyce parked behind the Mitchell Building and went into the manager's office. The receptionist there told him that no one named Harry Pierce had arrived as yet. Boyce sat down to wait.

He waited a full hour. No one showed up. Boyce called his office and got the number Harry Pierce had left earlier. He called the number. The phone at the other end rang a dozen times before it was finally answered by a male voice.

"Harry Pierce, please," Boyce said.

"Who?"

Boyce frowned. "Is there a Harry Pierce at this number?"

"You got me, Mac," came the answer. "This here is a pay phone at Union Station."

Boyce hung up. A clammy sweat broke out on the back of his neck. He hurried from the building back to the parking lot. Even before he got to the car he could see that another one of his tires was flat.

He stood there red-faced, looking down at the thin four-inch nail that had been driven into the casing. His stomach began to churn in outrage.

Boyce walked into his bedroom that night with a double bourbon-and-soda in his hand. Jean was just slipping into one of her cock-tail dresses. Boyce sat down on the bed, glancing at the clock. It was after eight.

"Where are you going?" he wanted to know.

"Client conference," Jean said easily.

Boyce grunted loudly. "What's his name?" he asked sarcastically. She did not answer. Boyce took a long swallow from his glass. "I think you've found yourself a boyfriend," he accused.

"And if I have?" she replied, turning to face him brazenly. "Don't you think I should be entitled to one boyfriend? After all your girl friends?"

"What girl friends?" he demanded. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, of course I don't," Jean said acidly. "All those florist bills and jewelry bills and liquor bills; those are business expenses, I suppose."

"Exactly!" he declared indignantly. "In real estate you have to do a certain amount of promoting. That's business."

"I'm sure it is," she retorted. "Monkey business." Jean Harper gave her hair a final pat and picked up her purse. "Don't wait up for me, Boyce," she said coolly. "I'll probably be late. Very late."

Boyce stared at the door his wife closed behind her. He flushed a deep red, then stood up suddenly and hurled his half-filled glass at the door. It shattered, spraying bourbon-and-soda all over the wall.

All right, he fumed silently. All right! Go ahead, my sweet wife, have a fling. But you'll sure have to do some stepping to catch up with me. He picked up the bedroom phone and dialed a number.

"Hello," said a female voice.

"Lana, this is Boyce. You alone?"

"Sure, Boyce, honey," she said.

"Well, don't go out. I'm coming over."

He hung up and started changing clothes. Lana wasn't much, he admitted; not beautiful by any means and certainly not the woman physically that his wife was; but she was easy, and that counted for something. She was at least better than being home alone.

He finished dressing and got his car out of the garage. It took him only a few minutes to drive to Lana's apartment. She lived in a stucco court not far from his office and worked in the drugstore where he bought cigarettes some-

times. That was how he had picked her up.

He parked half a block down from her building and walked back. He should have picked up a present for her somewhere along the way, he thought. Lana was a sucker for little gifts; they always made her extra receptive. But to hell with it, he decided. It was too late now anyway.

She met him at the door, wearing tight capris and a turtleneck sweater that did not match, and with her mouth and eyes over-painted too much to suit him. Sometimes he wished Lana had a little more taste. But then, he reminded himself again, she *was* easy, and that counted too. Boyce took her in his arms and kissed her.

They sat on the sofa, each with a fresh drink. There was little talk; for some reason they never had much to say to each other. Lana sat wishing she had something to say, while Boyce was immersed in jealous thoughts of his wife. The only sound in the apartment was soft music filtering from the hi-fi speaker.

Then the phone rang.

Lana crossed the room to answer it. "Hello," she said, then paused. After a few seconds she looked over at Boyce inquiringly and covered the mouthpiece with her

palm. "It's for you," she said, puzzled.

"Me?" Boyce felt a flush of warmth creep up into his throat and his stomach leaped in four different directions. He went over and took the phone with a trembling hand.

"H—hello," he said hesitantly, half expecting to hear Jean's voice answering him. Instead he heard a male voice.

"Mr. Harper? This is the Ajax Garage. Understand you've been having a lot of flat tires lately. Wanted to let you know that we fix any flat for only one dollar and—"

"Listen, who is this?" Boyce demanded hotly. "What kind of game are you playing with me?"

There was a click at the other end. "Hello," said Boyce. "Hello!" He hit the button several times to get a connection, but it was no use; the line was dead. Boyce slammed the receiver down.

"I've got to go," he said, half to himself but loud enough for Lana to hear.

"But Boyce, honey," the girl protested.

"Oh, shut up!" he snarled. He snatched up his coat and tie and hurried out of the apartment. Walking swiftly down the street he conjured up a mental picture of four flat tires. Just the thought of

it made his stomach gurgle and jerk spastically. He cursed steadily under his breath.

When he got to his car, Boyce was surprised to see that all four tires were just as they should be; not one flat. Wrinkling his brow, he examined the vehicle inside and out. He found nothing unusual. The motor, he thought. Maybe whoever it is did something to the motor.

He got behind the wheel and cautiously turned on the ignition. The engine caught nicely and hummed quietly. Boyce shifted into drive and pulled away from the curb. He drove slowly for two blocks, carefully testing the brakes, the lights, even the radio and horn. Everything worked perfectly. Sighing heavily, he settled back in the seat and depressed the accelerator, picking up speed.

Two blocks farther up the street the car began to smoke.

Fumes were seeping into the car through the heating system. Billows of smoke began trailing along both sides from beneath the hood. An acrid odor engulfed Boyce. He coughed several times and had to lower the window in order to breathe.

Luckily, there was an open service station at the next corner. Muttering new curses, Boyce pulled in and parked in front of the lube

rack. The attendant came over to him.

"See if you can find out what's causing all the smoke," he said, wiping watery eyes with his handkerchief.

While his car was being checked, Boyce walked over to a vending machine and got a bottle of soda. By now his stomach was burning fiercely and felt as if it might erupt momentarily if he didn't pour something cold into it.

Somebody must have followed him, he thought. There was no other way anyone could have known he was at Lana's apartment. But who? And why? Could Jean possibly have a private detective on his tail? He doubted it. There was no reason for it. Jean couldn't stand a divorce any more than he could; professionally, it would hurt her as much as it would him. Besides, a private detective wouldn't pull all the stunts that were being pulled on him. No, there had to be some other explanation.

Boyce finished the drink and felt his stomach settle down a little. Maybe Jean had hit on it earlier, he thought. Maybe it *was* one of his extra-marital women trying to get even. There were enough of them. And he had certainly strung some of them along with pretty wild promises before finally dropping them when they called his bluff.

Yes, it could be an old girl friend, all right. Of course, it was always a man who called, and it would have had to be a man to force those nails into his tires; still, a woman might be the instigator.

"Looks like somebody played a little joke on you, mister," the station attendant said, walking over and interrupting Boyce's thoughts.

"What do you mean?" asked Boyce.

"Well, there's really nothing wrong with your car. All that smoke is just exhaust waste. Ordinarily it goes out the tailpipe, only your tailpipe is plugged up. Somebody shoved a potato in it."

"A *what*?" Boyce said incredulously.

"Potato," the attendant repeated. "The only sure-fire way to plug an exhaust is to shove a potato into it. Potatoes are moist under their skins; they stick to the inside of the tailpipe so no air can get through. Hard as the devil to get out, too. Have to scrape the inside with a knife. Probably take a while. You wanna wait?"

"No, I'll come back for it," Boyce said dully, his mouth agape slightly at the thought of a potato in his tailpipe.

The attendant moved away to begin work on the car. Boyce walked off the station lot and headed down the street, shaking his

head in abject confusion. His stomach, temporarily cooled down by the soda, was on fire again. He turned in at the first cocktail lounge he came to.

At ten o'clock the following morning, Boyce lay stripped to the waist on an examination table in the offices of Dr. Phillip Redman. The doctor had just completed an examination of Boyce's midsection and was making notations on Boyce's medical record.

"Looks like an ulcer, Boyce," Redman said matter-of-factly. "I'm going to make an appointment for you to have x-rays and a fluoroscope examination. In the meantime I want you on a bland diet, no fried dishes, no coffee, and, above all, no liquor. Understand?"

"How bad do you think it is?" Boyce asked, sitting up and putting on his shirt.

"Hard to say," answered Redman non-committally. He made a few more notations, then put his pen aside and looked up openly at his patient. "How's business, Boyce?" he asked. "You under any particular pressures, have any financial problems, anything like that?"

"No, of course not," Boyce said. "I keep my business in perfect order. Why do you ask?"

Redman leaned back and lighted a cigarette. "An ulcer," he ex-

plained, "is a breakdown of tissues, either of the skin itself or of the mucous membranes. It can stem from a variety of causes. The most common ulcers are surface ulcers, such as coldsores. Then there are the internal types: gastric, peptic, duodenal and ordinary stomach ulcers. You probably have one of those four. All of them are normally caused by the action of acid gastric juices and nervous tension. It was nervous tension I had in mind when I asked if you had any unusual business worries."

"I see," said Boyce. "You think my nerves are causing all this?"

"Probably," Redman admitted. He paused in thought for a moment, then said, "Boyce, I'm your doctor. I'm also Jean's doctor. But more than that, I'm a friend. In both capacities, anything you tell me will be held in strictest confidence."

"What are you getting at, Phil?" Boyce asked, smiling.

"Are you and Jean having domestic problems?"

Boyce forced a wider smile. "Certainly not!" he lied easily. "What ever gave you that idea?"

Dr. Redman shrugged. "It's usually one or the other; either business or personal. I only want to help you, Boyce. I want to help you to help yourself. About seventy five per cent of curing an

internal ulcer is up to the patient."

"You just give the orders, Phil," Boyce told him. "I'll do whatever you say. Forget about what caused it."

"All right," Redman said, sighing heavily. He handed Boyce a printed sheet of paper. "For the time being follow this diet. Avoid alcoholic beverages and coffee. You might cut down on your smoking, too. But above all, Boyce, you've got to keep as calm as possible. No stress, no strain, no worry. An ulcer is like a volcano. When it reaches a certain degree of irritation, it'll explode. We don't want that."

"I'll watch myself, Phil," Boyce assured him.

On his way out, Boyce noticed that Redman had a new receptionist. She was blonde and trim, very neat. He smiled engagingly as he passed her desk. As he expected, she smiled back. - Young, he thought. He filed her away in his mind as a future possibility.

On the Monday morning after his visit to the doctor, Boyce called at the office of Ashton Graham, a wealthy broker who was planning to retire the following month. Graham intended to move to his villa in Nice and spend his declining years in the warm French sun. Before leaving, he wanted to dispose of several apartment buildings he

owned on Park Avenue. The properties had a combined market value of over one million dollars.

For more than a week Boyce had been preparing to solicit the listing. He had arranged an appointment through a mutual friend. Then, brimming over with the Boyce Harper charm, he moved in for the kill.

"This certainly is a pleasure for me, Mr. Graham," he said, smiling widely as he shook hands with the broker. "I've admired your firm in general—and you in particular—for quite a long time."

"Well, thank you very much," said Graham, obviously pleased.

"I think it's the prestige your firm has that sets it apart from the other brokerage houses," Boyce went on. "I've always said there's no substitute for prestige. And I've often wondered why Graham and Company had so much, while the other firms seemed to lack it. But now that I've met you personally, I think my question has been answered. It's quite obvious now where that prestige came from."

"Well," said Graham, expanding a little as he soaked in the flattery, "I have tried to make my business just a little better than the rest. If I've been successful, it's because I've prided myself on keeping the name of Graham and Com-

pany right up there on the top."

"Pride," Boyce said thoughtfully. "As always, it goes hand in hand with prestige." He let his expression melt into a half-sad smile. "The business world is going to miss you, sir," he added quietly.

"Well, we all have to quit sometime," the broker replied in a melancholy voice. He fell silent for a moment, sighing reminiscently, then braced his shoulders and said, "But—right now we're both still in business, so let's get down to it. You wanted to discuss listing my buildings, I believe."

"Yes, sir," said Boyce, opening his briefcase. "I've drawn up a summary and outline of the services I can offer you, Mr. Graham. We have full advertising facilities and—"

Boyce was interrupted by Graham's secretary entering the office. "Excuse me, Mr. Graham, but there's a call for you. The party said it was urgent." Graham nodded and picked up the phone. "Alton Graham speaking." He listened quietly for a moment, then looked at Boyce with a frown. "What?" he said. "Is this some kind of joke?" Again he was silent, listening. Finally he said stiffly. "Yes, I'll be happy to give him your message," and hung up.

Alton Graham fixed Boyce Harper with a cold stare. "That was for

you, Mr. Harper. It was a man. He said to tell you that you'd better stay away from his wife if you knew what was good for you."

Wife! Boyce Harper thought frantically. Which one was he talking about? Then he suddenly recalled where he was and felt a warm flush creep into his face.

"Must be some practical joker, Mr. Graham," he said nervously, forcing a smile.

"Possibly," conceded Alton Graham, "but joke or not, it was in rather poor taste. Business is business, Mr. Harper."

"Yes, I know, sir, but—"

"But nothing, Mr. Harper. I have the name of Graham and Company to protect. I'm sure you understand."

Boyce's shoulders sagged. He understood, all right. "I don't suppose you'd care to have me leave this summary—?"

"I'm afraid not." Alton Graham buzzed for his secretary. "Good day, Mr. Harper."

Boyce fumbled with the papers and managed to get them back into his briefcase. He left Alton Graham's office, still blushing. In the elevator, his stomach began to burn from the fresh acid being generated by his taut nerves. He dreaded going back to his car. He knew when he got there he would find a flat tire.

He was right. Right as rain.

"Now you listen to me, Boyce," Dr. Redman said in an irritated voice, "you may be a couple of years older than me, and you may be a big shot businessman and all that, but I *am* your doctor and what I'm telling you is for your own good. I can't help you if you won't help yourself. I don't know what your mental problem is but I do know what your physical problem is. It's an ulcer and it's a bad one!"

"You're sure?" said Boyce.

"Positive. I've got all the results of your fluoroscopy and I've seen the X-rays on you. You've got a full-grown duodenal ulcer and it's getting healthier every minute. And do you know why it's getting healthier? Because you're feeding it alcohol and caffeine and nicotine and stomach acid. There's a monster growing down there and you aren't even trying to stop it!"

"I am trying, Phil," Boyce said weakly.

"No, you're not," Redman accused. "Jean has told me how you've been drinking lately."

Boyce's mouth tightened. "You've got no right discussing this with Jean," he said shortly.

Redman raised his eyebrows. "Oh? You're my patient, aren't you? She's your wife, isn't she? I think I have the right to try and

find out what you're killing yourself over."

Boyce turned pale. "Killing myself—?"

"Exactly. You may not realize it, Boyce, but an ulcer can be a dangerous thing. At the rate you're going, you'll perforate the thing one of these days and then you will have had it."

"What—what would happen?" Boyce asked nervously.

"That would depend on the circumstances. If they got you to the hospital in time, we could operate. If not, well—"

"I'd die?" Boyce swallowed down a dry throat.

"It's quite possible," Redman assured him.

"I see," Boyce said slowly. He stared open-mouthed at Redman, nodding his head almost dumbly. Then he silently picked up his shirt and started dressing.

"Here," Redman said, handing him a bottle of pills, "take one of these every time you start feeling tense or irritated. And for the last time, stay away from the liquor, understand?"

Boyce promised that he would. He slipped the bottle into his coat pocket and left. He did not even bother to smile at Redman's new receptionist on his way out.

That night Boyce was alone in his library. He was slumped back

in an easy chair with his feet propped up and a tall glass of milk on the table beside him. His face was relaxed—for the first time in days. He had just spent an hour forcing himself to calm down.

"I've got to deal with this situation realistically," he told himself. Someone obviously hated him, was deliberately trying to cause him trouble. He did not know who or why, but that didn't really matter at the moment. His primary concern right now was not to let it get him down. He had to prevent this—this scheme or whatever it was, from working. Later he would have time to find out who was doing it, and why. And when he did—

The phone rang. Boyce stretched over and picked up the extension. "Hello—"

"Good evening, Mr. Harper," said a familiar voice. It was the same voice that had first called as Carmichael Hospital, later as Harry Pierce, finally as the Ajax Garage the night he had been with Lana.

"What do you want now?" Boyce asked wearily.

"Just wanted to inquire about your health," the voice said pleasantly. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. I have so many nice surprises planned for the future."

Boyce's stomach began to churn.

"Who are you?" he said almost pleadingly. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Those are things you'll never know," the voice said. "I will tell you this much, though. In exactly one hour from now the worst thing yet is going to happen. So prepare yourself, old boy."

There was a click then and the line went dead. Boyce sat holding the silent receiver, staring at it fearfully. The worst thing yet, he thought helplessly. One hour from now. He looked at the clock. It was one minute past nine.

Pain was slowly building up in his stomach. He fumbled in his pocket for the pills his doctor had given him. Quickly he swallowed one, drinking some of the milk after it. He leaned back in the chair, trying to make his body relax in spite of the turmoil in his mind.

The worst thing yet. One hour from now.

Boyce sat absolutely still for the next twenty minutes, but he was unable to calm either his thoughts or his ulcer. The pain increased steadily. He took out the bottle of pills and read the label: ONE TO FOUR TABLETS AS NEEDED FOR PAIN. He shook a second pill into the palm of his hand and took it with another swallow of milk. Then he settled back and

tried once more to relax. The hands on the clock moved down to nine-thirty.

What was going to happen? he wondered frantically. And who was causing it, who was doing these things to him? If he only knew who, then he would probably know why. For the next few minutes he concentrated his thoughts on *who*. He tried to think of all the people he had used badly. This led to thoughts of all the women he had deceived. Then to all those who had been cheated by him in one way or another. Then to others, detached persons, who had been hurt indirectly by the things he had done, the way he had lived. His head began to cloud with names and faces that multiplied as fast as he could think. The scope of his dishonor was endless.

It's no use, he thought. There had been too many of them over the years. It would be easier to count those he had been honest with.

He looked at the clock. Ten before ten. He rubbed his stomach, wishing he could erase the pain. But he could not do that any more than he could erase the past. As the fury inside him increased, he bent forward in the chair, doubled over with pain. With shaking hands he managed to get two more pills into his mouth and down them with

the last of the milk, seeking relief.

As the minute hand moved up toward the hour of ten, the pain in his stomach mounted to white-hot pitch and leveled off into sheer agony. Then it seemed as if all his internal organs ruptured and erupted at once, putting a torch to every nerve-end in his body. He fell forward onto his knees, his face draining of color. Into his mind came the memory of his doctor's warning about the dangers of a perforated ulcer. A dread of death filtered through the pain and he struggled to his feet and managed to reach the phone. He dialed the operator.

"My name—is—Boyce Harper—" he said carefully, giving the girl his address. "Get—me—an—ambulance—"

At midnight Jean Harper was sitting in the hospital waiting room. She looked up as Phillip Redman walked in, still wearing his soiled surgical smock. He came over and stood next to her chair. She handed him a lighted cigarette she had been smoking and he took a long drag.

"Was the operation successful?" she asked.

Redman smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"He's dead then?"

Redman nodded again. "Yes."

Jean Harper sighed heavily. "Do you think there'll be any trouble?"

"I don't see why there should be," Redman answered. "I'm his doctor; I'll make out the death certificate. You're his lawyer; you'll probate his estate." He took another drag on the cigarette. "Did you destroy the rest of those pills I gave him?"

"Yes, down the drain."

"Good." He patted her hand reassuringly. "No, I don't think there will be any trouble."

Boyce Harper's widow nodded her head slowly. "Well, that's that."

"You're not sorry, are you?"

"No," she answered without hesitation, "he had it coming."

"He certainly did," Redman agreed.

Jean Harper smiled up at the doctor. "Why don't you change and we'll drive over to the house for awhile. I'll make some coffee."

"I could use some," Redman said, looking down at his bloody smock. "It was a nasty operation."

"I suppose it would be," she said, "with Boyce for a patient."

Dr. Redman nodded in silent agreement.

A gun with a crooked bark can provide an explosive situation especially for a trigger man.

BREAKING in a new gun can be tricky. I mean getting the feel of it, learning its quirks, how it weighs in your hand, whether it bucks or whether the grip sweats

excessively—you'd be surprised how each gun sweats differently—and even picking out a good name for it. It's hard, let me tell you.

NEW GUN

By
Arthur Kaplan



You get the gun, a stub end .38 Special, all oily and untried, from Maxey who's been supplying your guns ever since you ran away from home. It lies, a stranger, uneven in your pocket and then lumped in your shoulder holster. You go to the club that night and, just thinking about it, miss an easy chance to place the seven ball in a side pocket, to your extreme embarrassment. You apologize all the way around. You sit out for the rest of the night and go home about two, tired, but in bed you

leave on the light and examine the gun once again and tell yourself you'll have to try it a couple of times, get to know it before you use it.

But it doesn't work out that way because at six the phone rings and Harry Dupont—which is really a code name for three people who are in charge of operations in your end of town—calls.

"Melvin?"

"Yeah," you say, not recognizing the voice but knowing the tone. "Yeah, this is Melvin."

"At the Greek's, this afternoon." And the receiver is hung up quickly.

You know what the call means and you pick up the gun again and wipe it once more with an old silk handkerchief and peer down the barrel into the light, then you take out a box of shells and load it for the first time. You get a feeling you can't describe and only then you can go back to sleep.

You wake at noon, breakfast, and it's as if you're plugged in, your skin tingles so. Your appointment's for 3:30—all appointments with Harry Dupont are for 3:30. It's a well run organization. There are men involved who've attended Harvard Business School, those up and outs whom you never meet but only guess about or

hear mentioned in whispers, sitting in Chicago, New York, Vegas and Washington, in big offices, behind respectable businesses, men ostensibly occupied in the manufacture of paint, or soft goods, and in labor unions, with IBM machines at their disposal, which sort of makes you proud to be a part of it.

You shower at two—there's something almost religious about a shower then—and you're tense while waiting for the arm deodorant to dry. You shave carefully, then dress, and all the while you're thinking about the gun. Some of the others you've owned you called Princess, and Buck, Van Doren, and General Dynamics. And you look at it lying there quiet on the night table. Picasso? No. Jackie? No. Zsa Zsa? You try that on every new weapon you get. Charley, in honor of a buddy, Charley Abeloff, doing time in the Federal Penitentiary in San Quentin? Maybe. Charley. Sounds good. You'll think about it.

It's 2:45 then. You pick your tie, take two handkerchiefs in case you need to cover your face, put on a hat, look in the mirror once more and you're off.

The Greek's is Natie Goldstein's apartment near the river. You park several blocks away and check to see if anyone's trailing

you. No one. You move inconspicuously, like anyone else on an afternoon walk. A big dame wearing a silk polka dot blouse comes your way. Too big. Another dame; too old. A blonde holding one kid in each hand; too old. Still another; also old. And you're at Goldstein's apartment house.

You take the elevator to the seventh floor, make sure no one's looking, then walk down one flight. Again you make sure you're alone before you reach up and press a button on the top of the door frame; the reach makes the gun rub up against your armpit—it's still a stranger.

There's a movement behind the door and you know someone's examining you and unconsciously you straighten your posture. The door opens and you walk in, leave your hat on a tree in the foyer, pat your hair down. In the big room you nod a hello and of the four men there only two nod back. This is business, no time for ceremony. You sit, without another word, in the empty chair and a little fat guy whom you've never seen before comes out of the bedroom.

"This is your mark," he says without introduction and shoves an enlarged photo at you. You take the photo and everyone's eyes are on you, which makes you feel

good; you're an important cog in this machine. You study the photo and try to look serious but it's times like this that something inside of you wants to giggle or burst out laughing, you don't know what it is, you've had it ever since you were a kid, and when you think you can't fight it any longer you take out a handkerchief and wipe your lips. That sends it away.

"His name," the little fat guy says, "Is Tzimick. Capital T-z-i-m-i-c-k. He lives at 3708 Hurley Road."

You take out your pad and make a note.

The little fat guy snaps his fingers and someone puts out the lights and someone else turns on the slide projector. "Tzimick's house is between Argyle and Hooten Boulevards. It's a community of small houses built after the war on medium-sized plots. It's a middle-middle class neighborhood." A map flashes on the screen and the little guy uses a pointer as he speaks. "There's a supermarket here. Hurley Road is one way toward Hooten. Now, this is the house." He's using a clicker now and a color slide of a contemporary split-level, painted pink and gray, is flashed on. Definitely not your kind of place.

"Now," he goes on. "There's a

lawn in front of the house, as you can see, but most of the plot's in the rear, which narrows your target area. Tzimick likes to garden and he'll be in front of the house fifteen minutes after he returns from his office, which should be about four-thirty. The weather tomorrow will be fair and mild." Nothing about who this Tzimick is, what he has done, why the organization wants to get rid of him; it's one of the drawbacks to the profession, I mean being left in the dark so much. And again the little fat guy clicks his clicker.

A movie projector is turned on next. There are shots of the corners of Hurley and Argyle, of Hurley and Hooten, of the supermarket and of the traffic light, the neighboring houses. It's a disappointing film. Whoever shot it should have used a filter and the editing leaves a lot to be desired; where the cameraman could have used zoom shots, he didn't, and where no zoom is indicated, he did. It's the first time you've known the organization to turn out a sloppy job. You cross your legs and the gun, which you've forgotten, jabs you in the ribs and you straighten up again.

"Run that over again, slow," you say to make an impression and this time you're convinced that the camera work was done by

an amateur. When it's over the lights are flicked on.

"Neil, here," the little fat guy goes on, pointing to a thin, blonde man in a grey striped shirt sitting next to one of the lamps, "will be your driver. Neil," he says, turning to him, "do a couple of dry runs to get the feel of it. While Melvin's checking the mark you time the light. We clocked it at twenty seconds but make sure. When it turns green, count to twelve. Then you, Melvin, fire, and Neil'll take off. You'll catch the light just beginning to turn red. Any questions?"

"How am I sure that Tzimick'll be working in the front of the house?" you ask.

The fat guy looks pleased and smiles. "Good question," he says. "I'm glad you asked it. Because he has his vegetable garden behind the house and it's too early for vegetables. This time of year he's pruning bushes."

There are no other questions. Everyone gets up and the fat guy hands you a stack of bills in a rubber band. You count them and there are five hundred in old bills, just half your fee, like the contract calls for. You nod, place the money in your jacket and your hand brushes the gun. You walk over to Neil who has also just finished counting and you shake

hands, being very business-like.

"I heard about you," you say to Neil. "I heard about that time the carburetor flooded in front of the bank."

Neil smiles modestly. "I know your reputation, too, and I want you to know it'll be a pleasure working with you." Then the smile disappears and he's all business. "Leave your car in the municipal parking lot on Pearl. Here's a dime for the meter. Walk to the RKO Theatre where the Arthur Miller picture will be playing and be there exactly at four."

You nod.

Neil holds out his wrist, looks at his watch and you do the same. "Four twenty . . . two."

You say, "Right," and set your watch.

You shake Neil's hand once again and one of the men who hadn't said a word accompanies you to the door, opens it, looks up and down the corridor, and lets you out. You climb to the seventh floor and take the elevator there. You're too busy thinking of tomorrow to notice anyone in the street.

You take in a movie that afternoon to relax you and that night you eat well, oysters, steak, potatoes, big salad, milk and dessert; it'll be your last big meal before the job. You stay away from the

club, go home and read a little. You pick up the gun from time to time, palm it, examine it, then put it back. You would like to fire it just once before the job, but that's out. When you're fixing your bedroom window for the night you notice the car outside; someone inside is smoking a cigarette. You smile. What an organization! You're asleep by midnight.

The next morning you loll in bed until eleven, eat a breakfast of juice, bacon-and-eggs, English muffins, butter and lots of jam and milk—all energy foods. You leave the dishes in the sink and, still in your pajamas and robe, you relax in the living room, like you always do before a job, and listen to a stack of Sinatra records. Good old Frankie. Hey, you think, maybe you'll call the gun Frankie? You pick it up and palm it again. Not a bad idea. You doze on the sofa for a while, and try to think of nothing until the alarm goes off at two.

From then on it's all business. You shower and shave, put on lots of deodorant and brush your teeth vigorously. You dress carefully, pick out just the right tie, one that'll go well with the job—you'd be surprised how you can tell when it's wrong. You buckle on the holster, pat the gun a few

times and say, "OK, baby, do your stuff," get into a jacket and hat.

The car outside trails you all the way to the parking lot, then takes off. You know someone'll be watching the front of the RKO Theatre, which gives you confidence. You've got more than an hour on the meter but you put the dime in anyway. It's five minutes to four. You walk to the RKO, look at your watch and just at four Neil, in a blue car, pulls up and you climb in and shake hands.

"Nice day for a job," you say as Neil turns into traffic.

"Couldn't be better," he answers, not taking his eyes from the windshield.

After a few minutes, just to make conversation, you say, "What do you think of the Common Market, Neil?" Anything to keep your mind from tensing up.

"Well," Neil answers still not taking his eyes from the road. "I think it's a great idea, but a lot will depend upon the French. Did you read Lippman's column on it?"

You say yes even though it's a lie. Neil has a point. You make up your mind to see more of him. He's someone you can talk to.

You're at Hurley Road then, driving north and there's no more time for conversation. You unbutton your jacket and release the

safety strap and you've all but decided to call it Charley; it'll be a fitting tribute to a nice guy. Before you know it Neil says, "Argyle Boulevard," and he slows down and moves to the left. It's exactly 4:30. You watch Neil light one of those filter cigarettes and you wonder if he has any information on this cancer business—you make a mental note to ask him after everything's over.

Just like the fat guy says, Tzimick is in the front garden clipping bushes. The sun's just right, to your left—they really can plan things. Tzimick's bending over so you can't see his face. Should be easy, you tell yourself. Neil, timing the light, says, "Twelve," and picks up speed.

"Everything all right?" Neil asks as you turn the block.

"Couldn't be better," you say, taking the gun out of the holster and placing it in your lap.

"If everything's OK with you I don't think we need another dry run," Neil says.

"OK with me," you answer.

"I mean it's up to you," Neil says. "I don't want to pressure you. You think you want another dry run, I'm ready."

"I'm all right," you say. Gee what a swell guy.

You turn the corner and are back on Hurley Road. Traffic is

still sparse. Neil cuts easily to the left. You jerk the brim of your hat down and Neil pulls up noiselessly in front of the house, counting. You place the gun on the window frame to steady it—it doesn't sweat at all, you notice happily. There's no one on the sidewalk, Tzimick's back is toward you, Neil is saying, "eight, nine," you aim, "ten, eleven, twelve," and you fire.

The noise is loud and there's the usual stink of powder but the damn gun jerks up and to the right, the slug hitting into a bale of peat moss. Neil says, "Merde!" and the car leaps forward. You fire again, trying to compensate for the pull, but Tzimick has fallen on his belly and you don't even see where the second slug goes. Neil is still cursing and the car is racing toward the intersection trying to make the light when suddenly a milk truck pulls out of a driveway and Neil has to swerve to the right. There's a thud and he's slammed into a parked car.

There's a siren and screech somewhere behind you and you're just about to make a run for it when you look up and there's a cop with a frayed cuff holding a pistol.

"Drop the gun," he snarls.

Out of the corner of your eye you see that Neil has already got his hands up and you drop the miserable gun as if it has the plague.

When you meet Charley Abeloff the first time in the exercise yard you introduce him to Neil.

"Neil says that he isn't impressed with the Peace Corps idea," you add just to start conversation.

"Hell!" Charley, who's a Democrat, answers. "If they'd've listened to Harry Truman in the first place there wouldn't be any commies left."

"That's sheer nonsense," Neil says, "If..."

But just then the bell sounds for marching back to cell block, and you're convinced it'll be some ten years.



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Those who look upon Alice in Wonderland with disdain should definitely pass this story by lest the psychic powers of this mirror foment a psychosis.



IT WAS September 15, 1898. The Spanish-American war was over. The town of Patuka was celebrating. Everyone who was hale and healthy enough to trudge down to the depot had turned out to welcome back the volunteers.

The fireman's band was playing. And the children, bobbing up and down like frogs in a mill pond, were spilling flowers and fruit over the immaculately swept platform. Everyone was jabbering and jittery with excitement. It wasn't often that something this important happened in Patuka.

Someone began shouting that he saw smoke rising from the engine stack about a half mile away. The

tracks were low, in the valley along the river bank. The train wasn't visible yet.

Then everyone heard the whistle and began cheering. And before the band found the page and the people could start singing, the train had pulled in and the soldiers tumbled out, laughing, hulloalooing, like a pack of broncos at round-up time.

John Trumbal jumped down from the last car wearing a civilian suit. He greeted his neighbors gayly, then turned to help a lady down from the car.

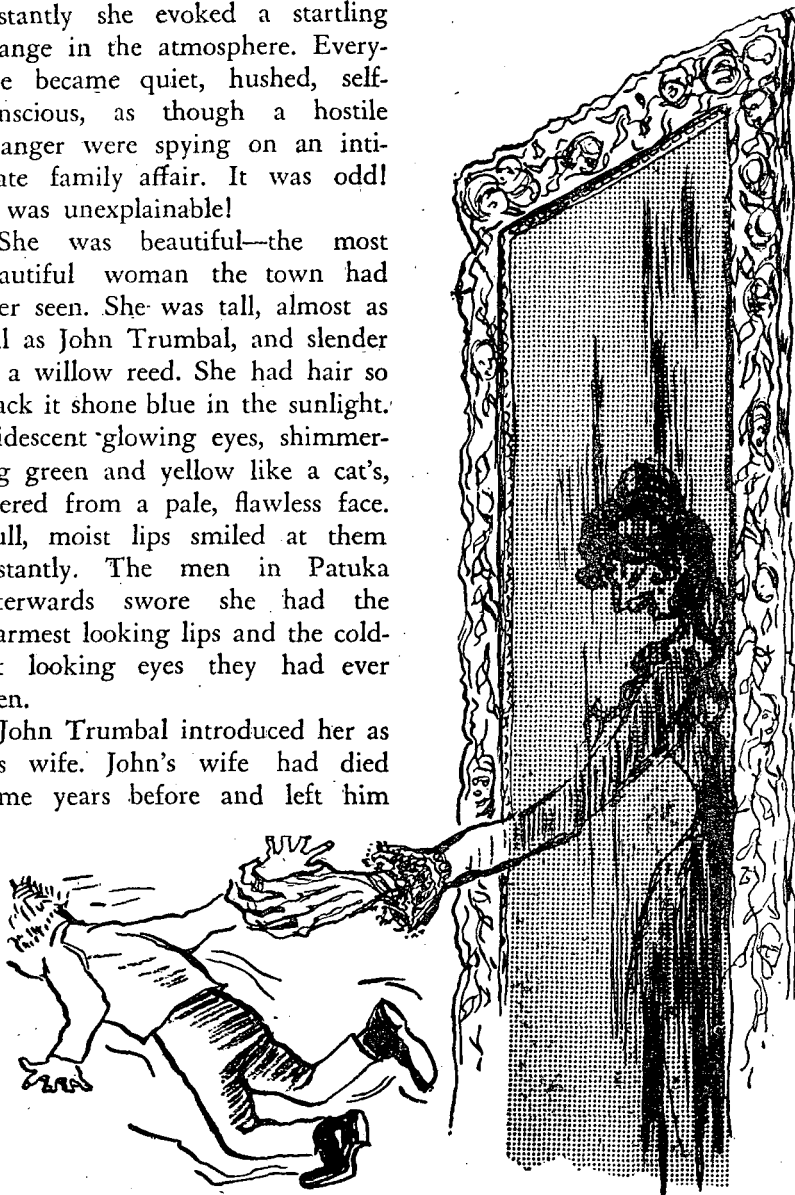
The station rang with laughter and cheers and kisses and tears . . . until the woman clutching



Trumbal's hand stepped down. Instantly she evoked a startling change in the atmosphere. Everyone became quiet, hushed, self-conscious, as though a hostile stranger were spying on an intimate family affair. It was odd! It was unexplainable!

She was beautiful—the most beautiful woman the town had ever seen. She was tall, almost as tall as John Trumbal, and slender as a willow reed. She had hair so black it shone blue in the sunlight. Iridescent glowing eyes, shimmering green and yellow like a cat's, peered from a pale, flawless face. Full, moist lips smiled at them distantly. The men in Patuka afterwards swore she had the warmest looking lips and the coldest looking eyes they had ever seen.

John Trumbal introduced her as his wife. John's wife had died some years before and left him



with a boy. He always used to talk about marrying again, but no one had ever dreamed of his coming home from the war with a bride . . . and such a bride!

The young Mrs. Trumbal seemed very anxious about a large flat crate the porters were unloading from the last car. She persuaded her husband to leave off greeting friends to tend to its safe storage in the wagon. And she would not budge from the side of that wagon until John Trumbal mounted the buckboard and agreed to start for home. The townspeople of Patuka watched their departure with relief.

The new Mrs. Trumbal was greeted in her new home by John's eleven-year-old son, Luke, John's brother, Andrew, and an elderly housekeeper called Emma.

Asti, Mrs. Trumbal, greeted them with haughty, chilling reserve. And shortly after arriving she seemed seized with a strange fit of restlessness and discomfort. While they were talking her lips began suddenly to tremble and she grew very pale. She clutched her breast and gasped desperately for breath. She pleaded weariness and asked to be shown to her room, requesting that the mysterious huge crate be brought to her and unpacked.

John and his brother lugged

the crate into the downstairs bedroom while Luke fetched tools. Asti pranced impatiently about the room as they pried apart the slats which formed the box and folded back the numerous quilts which protected the contents of the crate. Excitedly, Asti herself threw aside the last remnants of packing and revealed the contents.

It was a mirror of monstrous proportions. The heavy gilt frame was elaborately carved with legions of tiny heads laced together by a tenacious, leafy vine. The faces on these Lilliputian heads were strikingly lifelike, their faces reflecting the gamut of emotions. Some grimaced ingratiatingly. Some stared with listless guile, some with apathy, some grinned lecherously, some wept despairingly. It was grotesque how each little face took on such a fantastically life-like quality. The searching eyes, the delicately formed ears, the incredible variety of noses were intriguing. It was as though each little head had been molded by a master from a living face.

John felt a shudder chill his spine as he examined the mirror. His wife, however, sighed with relief when she saw the mirror was undamaged.

"Hang it right away, John," she pleaded. "I'm so tired."

John looked at her, not quite

understanding her meaning. Her native tongue was Spanish and she often had trouble expressing herself in English.

John and his brother struggled to get the mirror on end. Then they mounted it on a hastily constructed bracket on the wall in the bedroom. It was so huge that, with the frame, it extended from the floor to the ceiling.

Once it was in place, Asti stood before it glowering eagerly at her ravishing image in the mirror. John and his brother stood behind her, their faces aglow with admiration. She was so beautiful! It was no wonder she took such pleasure in her reflection. But Emma, who stood watching at the open door, was less impressed by the vision. She was a rather plain, outspoken, prudish old woman. To her it was a bad sign, an evil sign, to have a young female take such pleasure in her own image.

As soon as Asti was certain the mirror was properly secured on the wall she pleaded exhaustion, and begged to have some time alone to rest.

This sudden exhaustion, and the need to rest alone became an established practice of young Mrs. Trumbal. She reserved a few hours for her solitary pursuits each day. She would retire to her room and bolt the door. For at

least an hour absolute silence reigned in that lower bedroom. A peculiar, almost sepulchral, atmosphere invaded the whole house during the hours of Asti's seclusion. And when, at last, she unbolted the door she always appeared most refreshed and in good spirits.

John's ardour cooled inexplicably. He could not explain. Asti was affectionate, dutiful . . . but when he touched her he shuddered. He was reluctant to admit, even to himself, that he had formed an uncanny aversion to his wife. There was something about her that seemed aged . . . musty, wrinkled. He knew it was insane. She was young, beautiful . . . Guilt and regret so obsessed him he avoided her, absorbing his time with farm chores and trips to town.

Andrew's reaction to Asti was entirely different. Andrew behaved as though he were possessed. He fawned, he made foolish pretences to see her. His eyes followed her every move. His attentions and solicitude became urgent . . . pressing. His brother's wife was clearly annoyed. His amorous attentions were quite undesired.

And then, a very strange thing happened. Andrew disappeared! He simply vanished. There were

no clues indicating where he might have gone. The sheriff and John were puzzled. How could a man just evaporate? And that was just what seemed to have happened. No one had seen him leaving town.

It was after this that Emma began spying on her mistress. She began to slip into the bedroom when Mrs. Trumbal was out walking. Each day when she was sure that her mistress had left the farm, she began to poke through the luggage that still stood everywhere about the room. She examined all the personal articles that Mrs. Trumbal had laid out upon the dresser. She fingered the jewels and sniffed the fine perfumes. She ran her rough palm over the fine silk and satin garments that were folded in the drawers. They were very elegant, but rather old fashioned for such a young woman, and everything had a strange odor about it . . . as though it had been stored in a damp cellar for a very long time.

And the mirror was peculiar. It was so large! It dominated the room. To move about in that room, within the range of the reflection of that mirror, was like having an enormous, fiendish eye following every motion, every gesture that was made. It left Emma moist with cold each time she en-

tered the room. Still . . . she could not resist returning time and time again to poke about that weird, forbidding room.

She began a methodical study of the intricate little heads that composed the frame of the mirror. One afternoon as her eyes pored over the carvings, she noticed one face that had a definite familiarity about it. She ran her fingers over the finely rounded cheeks and felt the hollow of the eyes, and the sharp edge of the chin. There was something just too, too familiar about this face. She leaned closer, her nose almost touching the frame. Her breath caused moisture to form on the surface of the glass. She strained to see every last detail of the face. She thought and thought. Then . . . suddenly, it was clear!

She gasped, her face flushed with the horror she felt. Of course she recognized the face! Of course! Hadn't she seen that face every day for nearly twenty years? Of course! Of course! It was Andrew!

She spun about. She wanted to find John and tell him right away! Perhaps he would know what it was all about. Then she smelled it . . . air that was cool and stale and dank as a mountain cave. She glanced into the mirror and saw Asti! Emma looked behind her. She was alone in the room. No one stood behind her to throw that re-

flection into the mirror. Asti was *in* the mirror. She was on the other side of the glass looking out at Emma. Her eyes were flashing. Her lips were parted. Her teeth were bared. . . . She looked fiendish!

Emma *screamed*. Asti reached one white, cold, clawlike hand through the glass of the mirror and caught hold of Emma's arm!

No one could think of any reason why Emma would want to leave the farm. She had worked for John Trumbal for over twenty years, and until quite recently had always seemed quite happy at her job. She had raised young Luke lovingly. She had kept their humble little house a home with selfless devotion. No one could imagine what would make Emma leave so suddenly, or where she could have gone. She had no other family. She had some money saved, but, upon investigation, it was discovered she had not even taken that with her. The sheriff and John suspected foul play, but no evidence could be found, and Emma's disappearance remained a mystery.

A strange, awesome stillness cloaked the farm now. Neighbors whipped their horses to a trot when they passed. Visitors were rare. The Trumbal farm was wreathed by the menace of strange,

ominous tragedy. Of course there was no visible change. . . . It was just felt. Felt and feared!

Luke, contaminated by this aura of fear and suspicion surrounding his home, was shunned by his school friends and former playmates. The new girl, Mary Ellen, who came from town each day to cook and clean, was a shy, drab, moody creature. She evaded all the boy's overtures of friendship. More and more Luke sought the companionship of Asti.

One afternoon Asti and the boy made plans to explore the river bank north of the farm. They had agreed to meet by the well after lunch; but it grew late, and Luke still sat alone on the stone wall, dropping pebbles into the black throat of the well. Finally he grew impatient and ambled back to the house. He stood outside Asti's bedroom window. The curtains were closed, but at the very bottom the fabric had caught on the sill and was folded back. It left a sliver of an opening. Through this, Luke peered into the room.

It took a moment for his eyes to accustom themselves to the shadowy dimness of the room. When they did, he saw Asti moving around before the mirror. She was combing her hair and fastening the buttons on her dress. Then, suddenly, Luke rubbed his eyes. It was

impossible! Incredible! She was not in front of the mirror. She was *in it!*

Quickly Asti stepped out of the mirror, and the silver surface of the mirror was restored. Luke tried to stifle his gasp, but it was too late. Asti must have heard . . . or sensed the boy's presence. Slowly she approached the window. And before Luke could make his fear-frozen feet budge, she threw aside the curtain and smiled.

Catching his hand in a talon-like grip she said softly, "How naughty you are, Luke, to peep through the window like this."

"I was waiting for you . . ." stammered the boy.

"Oh yes, I forgot." She patted his cheek with her other hand. "Come inside. I want to show you something."

The boy drew back, trembling. The hand was so cold. She smiled again, a friendly, beguiling smile, and released his hand.

"Don't be afraid. I'm not angry. Don't be afraid. I just want to show you my Magic Mirror."

"Magic. . . ?" Luke blinked and scanned her face. It looked kind. Kind and beautiful.

"Yes. Don't you want to see it?" She pulled the curtains aside to clear the opening of the window.

A boy's curiosity will sometimes foolishly conquer his fear. He

climbed over the sill and followed Asti to the mirror. The strange image had disappeared.

"You see," purred her voice, "this is a very special mirror."

The boy began to draw away again.

"Yes," she caught his arm. "Every day I must go through this mirror to stay alive. I'm nearly five hundred years old, you know . . ." she added proudly.

"Let me go! Let me go!" shrieked the boy.

"No, no, dear. I can't let you go. You see no one must know about my Magic Mirror. I cannot live without it. It is the door of my grave."

The boy began whimpering. She stroked his hair gently and drew him closer to the mirror.

"This mirror," she crooned, "is my passageway between life and death. Come, I'll show you."

She hummed softly and pulled the boy still nearer the mirror.

"Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. It won't hurt. Come with me. Come with me, dear. It won't hurt. I know. I've been through many times."

They reached the mirror. She kept moving till she had half penetrated the glass. Then she turned and tried to coax him toward her.

The boy screamed. The silvery image of the mirror dissolved into

a moist, craggy corridor. He could smell the musty, mossy odor of a cavern. The black hollow formed a cave, a cavern . . . a tomb!

Luke's throat ached with shrieking. He clawed the air to stave off the inevitable. Panic lent him strength. He kicked and screamed and clutched the frame to resist her steady, powerful tow. Part of him already seemed to be falling . . . falling, falling or flying. He screamed loudly. His throat already was raw with crying . . . and steadily more and more of him was falling. . . .

He half heard someone pounding on the door. He mustered what was left of his strength and shrieked aloud again. He heard the sharp rap of an ax on the door handle. The door sprang open and he saw his father charge across the room toward the mirror.

John clutched the boy's extended hand in a painfully firm grip. He felt the inhuman strength behind Asti's towing. John was frantic. He saw his son being drawn deeper and deeper into the glass. He saw the image of his wife, clinging to Luke's other arm, smiling triumphantly, fiendishly, and succeeding, with the aid of unimaginable supernatural powers, in pulling John's son away from him. John could feel the boy slipping. He tightened his grip. The boy now

looked at him from the other side of the glass with indescribably frightened eyes. John still held his son's hand. He was determined to hold on to that hand. He held. . . . He held. . . . His feet slipped ahead. His strength could not match the power of this evil. But still he held. He held so firm, with such a vice-like grip, he felt his own hand drawn through the filmy surface of the glass. He screamed when he saw its image in the glass . . . but he would not let go! He would not let go!

Then there was a scream! A terrible, ghastly, nightmarish, pain-racked scream. And later—John knew it was his own scream he had heard.

All of a sudden, the two images, his son and Asti, had vanished! The glass became a mirror once again, and he saw only himself. He saw only himself . . . and not the hand that had passed the line of reality into sheer horror. There was pain . . . a pain that enveloped him and brought him to his knees. Darkness flooded around him and he sank. . . .

When he awoke, Mary Ellen stood over him, and so did the sheriff and several men from town. When Mary Ellen had heard the screaming and commotion she had been too frightened to enter the bedroom. She had fled into town

to get help. Now they all stood over him, their faces grim and sad, all looking as though they did not know what to say.

John Trumbal tried to sit but found himself too weak. There was a terrible pain in his right arm. He looked, and found it was swaddled in towels that were crimson. He looked up at them questioning-ly. Still no one spoke.

Finally Mary Ellen, hysterical, weeping, whimpered, "Your arm, Mr. Trumbal. . . . Your arm is gone!"

John looked at the mirror. It was just an ordinary mirror. It was incomprehensible that this vile instrument of the devil could look like any ordinary mirror.

He was weak, but he crawled forward on his knees and tapped the silvery surface of the mirror. His own image mocked him as he tapped the glass. It was, after all, only a glass!

His eyes suddenly caught the significance of the carvings. He had never really noticed them before. He stared aghast at the pathetic, suffering, miniature heads. His

eyes scanned the gallery of miserable faces . . . until. . . . He gave a wretched cry! He held out his remaining hand and sobbed.

Luke, his childish, gleeful face, twisted in unendurable agony, was imprisoned in the tentacled embrace of that carved vine. The harsh grain of the gilt lined his face with unweepable tears for all eternity.

John Trumbal howled in insufferable grief. He slammed his fist against the mirror until it shattered into a thousand shimmering slivers. The men standing near the mirror at the time swore they heard a woman moan as the glass broke and scattered over the floor.

For a long time the Patuka Fireman's Band did not even practice. The children were admonished to hurry home from school and to play indoors. There was little laughter, cheering or celebrating. It took time for Patuka to recover from its tussle with the supernatural. . . . But it did. And today, Patuka is back to normal. It is very much the same as it was that day in September back in 1898.

Every Friday

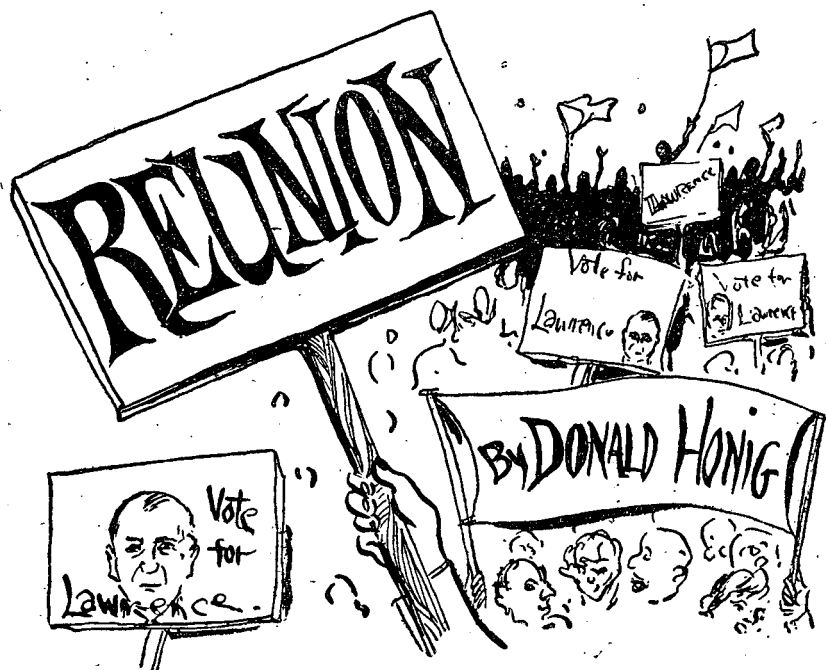
The television show, ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS, is one hour long, and may be seen on Friday evenings, on the CBS network.

When a fellow is out for personal aggrandizement it isn't likely a little thing like ethics will upset his political applecart.

PHILLIPSBURG gradually began to fill the windows of the slowing train. First came the outlying industrial area, then rows of sorry frame houses with heavily laden wash lines tied to backyard poles, then a better looking part of town with modern store fronts and one-family houses with broad lawns. By the time the train settled along-

side the depot Bill decided he liked Phillipsburg and was glad he had made up his mind to make the surprise visit. He rose from his coach seat and pulled his bag from the overhead rack and made his way down the aisle toward the door.

He descended the iron steps and carried his bag along the platform,



staring at everything and everyone with a childlike curiosity. Planning a surprise visit on an old friend—one whom he had not seen since their service together in Korea—filled him with a sort of mischievous excitement.

He crossed the waiting room and put his bag down next to the telephone booth. There he began turning over the pages of the directory (so much thinner than the city directories he was accustomed to) until he found the page he wanted. He ran his finger down the L's until he found the name: Lawrence, Harry. The word "attorney" was abbreviated next to the listing. Bill smiled with genuine gladness. So Harry had made it after all. Suddenly Bill remembered all that talk of the future—that desultory time-consuming talk that soldiers so frequently indulged in. Harry's legal schooling had been interrupted by his call to service, and so many quiet, brooding sentences had begun with the phrase, "When I get my degree . . ." Harry had had ambitions which were positively tenacious. He was going to become prominent in his profession, perhaps one day run for public office. Against the background of bleak, snow-clad Korean mountains, of shells exploding on a distant front, Harry Lawrence had planned, plotted

and foreseen his civilian future.

So he's making it, Bill thought, reminiscing for a moment as he stared at the name on the tissue-thin directory page, remembering his combat-weary and embittered friend who had seemed more than any of the others to hate where he was, what he was doing, who had always had terrible, almost neurotic premonitions of death. Bill's smile faded. Suddenly his recollections of Harry Lawrence sharpened in his mind, became more vivid. But it had been a long time ago. Things changed, and maybe people did too, as time lengthened.

He had to admire Harry's adhesive persistence to his dream, even though there had been obvious faults in the man's character. Harry's ambitious nature had been cold and calculating. Bill had come a long way to drop in on him, but he had to admit to an incorrigible curiosity about Harry. The man's absolutely unscrupulous attitude toward responsibility had intrigued Bill at the time and left him intrigued. What ultimately happened to such a man? But again, perhaps time had softened those hard and unattractive elements in the man. And besides, Bill thought, traveling around the country was quite a lonely thing at times, and there was a certain amount of charm involved in see-

ing an old acquaintance after the lapse of nine years. It would be pleasant to talk about old times and old friends—such as they had been.

He memorized Harry's number and stepped into the booth and dialed. The phone rang once and then a female voice, keyed to answering politely and inquiringly, picked it up and announced the firm's name.

"Is Mr. Lawrence in?" Bill asked.

"Yes. Who is calling please?"

"Never mind," Bill said with a grin and hung up.

So he was in. The thought had never occurred to Bill that Harry might not be there, that the one hundred mile detour to Phillipsburg might be in vain. Now he began to warm with excitement, planning his entrance, his opening line. The last time he had seen Harry was when the latter was being carried down the hill on a stretcher by two medics. Bill had stood there with the other members of the squad and watched him go. No one had said anything. Nine years ago. The wounded Harry had been shipped home from Japan and Bill had not seen him again. One or two letters had been exchanged. It was Harry who had stopped writing, and with Bill on the road so frequently, selling,

the friendship had gone into limbo.

As Bill walked along Phillipsburg's main street carrying his bag, he stared with favor upon the clean, modern, progressive-looking town. Harry certainly had known his quarters. A man of talent and ambition could grow in a town like this, set his goal and work confidently toward achieving it. The smaller the town, Bill remembered him saying, the bigger the man.

In the heart of Phillipsburg, across the street from the tree-shaded square where a statue of General Sheridan stood glaring archaically, Bill saw the long windows over a chain of stores and on the windows, in letters perhaps a trifle too large, too bold, HARRY LAWRENCE ATTORNEY AT LAW. Bill stood across the street and stared at the lettering for a few moments, then crossed the square and headed for the building.

He was impressed by the lavishness of the office. It was almost ostentatious. The entire decor had the mark of a man who was determined to shout of himself, to elevate himself, and who wanted all who wandered into his proximity to know it.

There were two people in the ante room. One was a well-dressed but rather sour-faced young man whose eyes fixed upon Bill the

moment he stepped through the door, and remained fixed upon him. A gray felt hat was balanced on the man's knee. 'I hope he's not a client,' Bill mused. The man looked so disgruntled.

The other person was a lovely blonde receptionist who smiled prettily at him.

"I'd like to see Mr. Lawrence," he said.

"Is he expecting you?" she asked.

"Hardly," Bill said. "This is a surprise visit. I haven't seen Harry since Korea. We were there together. May I walk in?" he asked, pointing to the inner office.

"I suppose it would be all right," the blonde said. She seemed amused.

Leaving his suitcase outside, Bill opened the door marked private and stepped into the office. There was Harry Lawrence, behind an impressive expanse of blue rug, sitting at a large, glass-topped oak-wood desk, perusing a paper. The years had gone gently with him (he did not look up immediately and Bill, closing the door quietly behind him, had a chance to study his friend). Vanity often kept restraints upon time and Harry did not look much older than he had ten years ago, except, perhaps, for a receding hairline. Bill advanced to the middle of the room and stood there, poised and expectant,

a mischievous smile playing on his mouth.

When Harry looked up his face showed first surprise, then betrayed a slight frown of suspicion, displeasure, almost as if trying to read—in this first moment of recognition before the smile of surprise, of pleasure—why this old friend was stepping unannounced out of the past.

Bill had an oddly discomfoting feeling as he suddenly remembered they had never really liked each other. It came back to him with a sweep of recollection, like an old gust of memory abruptly released from some slumbering corner of his mind. He almost felt like recalling this fact in statement and apologizing for the intrusion and leaving.

"Well, Bill," Harry said, smiling now, rising and offering a hand of welcome across the desk.

"Hello, Harry," Bill said, stepping forward and grasping the hand and shaking it warmly.

"What brings you into these parts?" Harry asked, sitting down again, waving Bill into a chair.

"I was traveling north of here and I remembered that I knew a guy in Phillipsburg," Bill said.

"Traveling?"

"Selling. Traveling salesman," Bill said. "No bad jokes, please. But you're looking well, and,"

Bill added, looking around appreciatively, "doing well, I'm glad to see."

"Yes," Harry said. "Trying to get on. Getting the practice built up."

"It's been a long time, Harry," Bill said.

"It does move by, doesn't it? So, are you planning to stay long?"

"Just a few days," Bill said. "According to my reckoning, the company owes me a few days of leisure."

"Married?"

"No," Bill said. "You?"

"No. There just hasn't been time," Harry said. "Look, old man, I'm going to be tied up shortly. Why don't we get together for dinner tonight and talk about old times, as they say? Where are you staying?"

"I just walked off the train. I haven't found a place yet."

"Stay in the Excelsior, it's the best in town. Tell them you're my friend."

"What will that get me?" Bill asked chidingly.

"The best," Harry said, seriously.

There was an embarrassing pause. Bill felt rather uncomfortable. He got up and they shook hands again.

"Good," Harry said. "I'll come by about seven. Good seeing you again."

As Harry walked him to the door Bill noticed a slight limp in his friend's gait.

"Is that from—?"

"Yes," Harry said curtly. "The wound. Well, see you tonight," he said, opening the door and showing Bill out.

Outside, the receptionist smiled at him.

"That was quick," she said.

"Yes. A busy man," Bill said as if trying to make apologies for the brevity of his visit. He picked up his bag, glanced at the dead-faced man with the felt hat on his knee who was staring mutely at him, and left.

Bill was sitting in his room at the hotel at seven o'clock when the telephone rang. It was Harry's receptionist. Apologetically, she had a message. Harry would be unable to keep his appointment this evening.

"Then you come," Bill said impulsively. After a moment's demurring pause she said all right.

Her name was Lynn McGrath. She had been Harry's secretary for almost a year. Talking idly over dinner, Bill learned that Harry had indeed not changed during the years, that he often worked so late in the office that she would find him sleeping on his office couch in the morning.

"I've never seen a man so driv-

en," she said, "so very ambitious."

"He was always like that," Bill said.

"Were you good friends?"

"Well, yes and no," Bill said hesitantly, knowing that they had not been. "He's a tough man to get close to. In the army you're sort of thrown together. The most unlikely people become friends."

"You don't seem so unlikely," Lynn said.

"Thanks."

"But Harry was genuinely sorry that you couldn't get together. He'd completely forgotten about the rally and said he might drop over later tonight."

"What rally?" Bill asked.

"In the school auditorium. Didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That he's running for Congress."

"No," Bill said shaking his head. "He didn't say a word about it."

"That's odd," Lynn said.

"I wonder why. It doesn't sound like him, to keep that a secret."

"It's hardly a secret."

"I mean, from me," Bill said. "Of course we only spoke for a few minutes."

"Maybe he was being modest," Lynn said.

"Harry?" Bill asked with light, humorous skepticism. They both laughed.

Bill suggested they attend the rally. So after dinner they walked through the cool, pleasant night to the school auditorium. Outside, the place was ablaze with lights, flags and placards swung through the air, and a small band of high school musicians were assembled on the lawn playing martial airs. This was more like it, Bill thought; this was as he imagined Harry Lawrence, and not the man in the quiet office in the small town. This was the grandiose background that Harry had always depicted for himself.

All immovable objects were covered with campaign posters. Bill paused to stare at one. There was Harry's face, handsome, serious, almost grim with resolution, perhaps a little too resolute and humorless. Beneath, it said: VOTE FOR HARRY LAWRENCE/ATTORNEY, FIGHTER FOR FREEDOM/DISABLED VETERAN.

"Disabled veteran," Bill said aloud, thoughtfully.

"Yes," Lynn said. "But you knew that, of course."

"No, I didn't," Bill said. "The last time I saw Harry was when he got wounded."

"Were you there when it happened?" Lynn asked as they crossed the street to the school.

"Sort of," Bill said.

They took seats in the last row

of the auditorium. In a little while the speeches began. Harry had drawn quite a large crowd and it was keyed up. The man who introduced him (Lynn identified him for Bill as the publisher of one of the town's two newspapers—the other was violently opposed to Harry's candidacy) made an impassioned speech, dwelling grandiloquently upon Harry's service record and the fact that "this man has felt the heat and the steel of our nation's enemies and shed his blood in its cause." It got a rousing cheer. Bill watched Harry; the latter seemed almost hypnotically engrossed in what the speaker was saying. He believes in it all, Bill thought, he actually believes in it. Then Harry, having finally been introduced, walked, limping perceptibly (and, Bill thought, exaggeratedly) to the lectern and made his speech.

Bored by the speech, Bill's eyes wandered and, to his surprise, caught sight of the dead-faced man he had seen in the office that morning. The man was on the stage, leaning against a far wall, invisible to all except the people—Bill and Lynn were two of these—who were sitting facing the stage from a sharp angle. When the speech was over and everyone stood up to cheer, and the high school band to play the National Anthem, the

man disappeared through the off-stage exit.

Bill and Lynn did not wait for Harry. At the conclusion of the speech they left the noisy auditorium and went to a nearby cabaret for a drink.

"Quite a spectacle," Bill said as they sat at a quiet back table.

"I hear the sound of disapproval," Lynn said.

"Maybe," Bill said. "What are his chances?"

"Quite good. He won the nomination and started the campaign as an underdog but has come a long way. Now he's expected to win. The incumbent is an old man who has voted unpopularly on some local issues . . ."

"And is not a disabled veteran."

"No," Lynn said. "You don't seem to approve of Harry's using that as a point. Well, it seems to be a legitimate campaign device to me. Men have campaigned on much less. But since you were over there with him perhaps you have your own viewpoint on that. Perhaps you think he's taking advantage of something . . ."

"Perhaps," Bill said quietly. "And by the way, who was that friendly-looking fellow I saw in the office this morning? I saw him again on the stage just now, hovering in the background."

"Oh, him," Lynn said. "His

name is Fancy. I disapprove of him; not that I have anything to say about anything. He worships Harry, and I guess this is all you have to do to be a friend of Harry's."

"This fellow adds a distinctly disreputable note to things, if you ask me."

"I quite agree," Lynn said. "I think he's somewhat of an unsavory character. He had an older brother who was killed in Korea, and when Harry came back—a sort of hero—Fancy attached himself to him. The man never talks. I don't think I've heard him utter ten words all the time he's been around."

"That sort of man isn't going to do Harry any good," Bill said.

"I mentioned that to him once, but he became quite angry and said that any man who was a friend was worth having around," Lynn said. "Harry doesn't have many friends, not people who really *like* him, anyway. Everyone respects him and his abilities, but there aren't many who are truly close to him."

Later that night, quite late, Bill was sitting in his room, unable to fall asleep. His thoughts were concerned with Harry Lawrence. He was thinking about Korea. What kind of man had Harry really been then? Harry had been strange,

cold, aloof; a friend only because the accident of circumstances had thrown them together. He realized now that he hardly knew the man. He felt that he should not have come. He did not like Harry Lawrence, nor did he like what the man was doing. Bill felt himself feeling increasingly resentful.

A knock at the door interrupted his reverie. He answered the knock and Harry came in. There was a certain brusqueness to the man, the same old aloofness, as if he had come here on distasteful business rather than to have a reunion with an old friend.

"I guess you've found out what I'm doing," Harry said abruptly, unceremoniously.

"I was at the rally tonight," Bill said. "You limped quite impressively."

"I thought you would think something like that. I knew the moment you walked into the office this morning you were bringing trouble."

"I'm not bringing any trouble, Harry."

"Then you're leaving town?"

"When I'm ready."

"And when will that be?"

"I told you—when I'm ready. I don't know when that might be. Your campaign interests me."

"Don't start anything, old friend," Harry said, intoning the

last two words with obvious sarcasm.

"I wasn't planning to, but seeing you, hearing you, thinking about what you're doing, it's given me a damned sick feeling and maybe the only remedy is a good dose of truth," Bill said.

"You're giving me a damned sick feeling myself and maybe the remedy is not truth."

"Am I to take that as a threat?"

"Take it any way you choose," Harry said. "But I don't intend letting any ghosts from the past come in now and upset what I'm doing. I hope you're listening with both ears, Billy boy. You never were overly bright, but I hope you've gotten smarter with the years. Don't involve yourself in something that's out of your league." Harry headed for the door. He paused to say, "There's an eight o'clock train tomorrow morning. Do us all a favor and be on it." And he left.

For the next hour Bill paced his room, chain smoking cigarettes, restive and resentful. Slowly an anger built in him. What had been quiet resentment before now flared into anger. He had been threatened. He did not like that. It was ugly. It made Harry and what he was doing the uglier, the more reprehensible. Harry was not merely a charlatan and an opportunist,

he was something worse. He was a dangerous, scheming man. The recent scene in this room convinced Bill of that, convinced him that he had to do something about it.

He put on his jacket and left the hotel. An idea had come into his mind, vaguely at first, but the more he dwelled upon it the more it seemed to be the right thing to do. He did not ask himself why it was the right thing, nor why he was doing it. He simply accepted it. He had made a judgment and now he was going to act upon it. Right and wrong seemed clearly defined in this case and, like a man following an instinct, Bill hurried along the deserted late night streets toward the newspaper office—the other one, the one supporting Harry's rival—when a car pulled up to the curb next to him. Harry was at the wheel.

"Get in," Harry said.

"Why?" Bill asked suspiciously.

"I want to talk to you."

Suppressing his suspicions, Bill got into the car. Not until he had closed the door, and was sitting next to Harry in the front seat did Bill notice the man, Fancy, sitting like a statue in the shadows of the back seat.

"Where were you going, Bill?" Harry asked as the car pulled away.

"Frankly?" Bill asked candidly.

"Of course," Harry said. "You're talking to an old friend." There was a faint, almost mysterious smile on his lips.

"I was going to tell about you," Bill said. He was too vehemently filled with indignation toward Harry, and with the righteousness of his decision, to lie about anything now, even though he felt it unwise of him to have made this admission.

"I'd rather hoped you wouldn't, though I was afraid you might," Harry said.

They seemed to be driving away from town. The passing houses were becoming less and less frequent. The car's headlights were cutting a wide path down the lonely highway.

"Where are we going?" Bill asked.

"Out of Phillipsburg," Harry said. "We don't want you in this town."

"You've decided that, have you?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I've decided."

Bill looked back over his shoulder at the mute, stolid figure in the back. Fancy stiffened at the movement and Bill sensed the man was poised and prepared to move against him. For the first time he had a genuine feeling of fear. He looked back at Harry.

"What is this all about?" he demanded.

Harry said nothing. They drove silently for another few miles, and then Harry turned off the highway and followed a dirt road into a dark, heavily wooded area. After a few minutes of bumpy going he stopped. He turned off the motor and ordered Bill to get out. Fancy slid like a cat from the back seat and was facing Bill when the latter got out of the car. The three of them walked around to the front of the car and stood in the glare of the headlights.

"So this is the way it's to be," Bill said, squinting through the lights at the two men who faced him like accusers.

"Yes," Harry said. "You couldn't mind your business. So it has to be this way."

"And you're going to go on, faking your way."

"Perhaps," Harry said. "But it's no longer going to concern you."

"You mean he's just going to pull the trigger and that will end it?" Bill asked. "It's going to be as simple as that?"

"Fancy knows how to take care of these things. He's a very skillful man."

Bill looked at the dapper little gunman who was watching him with steady unblinking eyes. A revolver had appeared in Fancy's

hand. Never had Bill seen a colder face, a more gross mouth, dead-er, more lightless eyes. There was no question that Fancy would, when Harry gave him the nod, pull the trigger of that gun; and somehow, too, Bill knew that Fancy would indeed know how to take care of the rest of it. The man looked born for assignments of this nature. Harry had chosen him well.

Bill was going to say, 'But you're running for a seat in the Congress of the United States, and here you are in the woods at night,



about to commit murder.' He would have said it, had he thought it would help. But it would not help. Harry was no more interested in ethics, or moral responsibilities, or serving his country now than he had been in duty or personal responsibility, or serving his country in Korea. Harry was simply and ruthlessly out for personal aggrandizement, and you did not mention the question of ethics.

"And what will you do about him, Harry?" Bill said nodding toward Fancy. "He'll know something about you. Perhaps one day he'll be tempted to talk too."

"Fancy knows the value of silence," Harry said.

"How much does he know about you now?"

"He knows his job, that's all."

"Does he know about Korea, or are you afraid to tell him?"

"He doesn't know, but even if he did—he's loyal, he can be trusted."

"You don't know what your great hero did in Korea, do you?" Bill said turning to Fancy, feeling a wild desperation but trying to keep it under control, to let his thoughts continue to come rationally.

"And he doesn't care," Harry said. "Because it's none of his business."

Bill, still addressing Fancy, wet his lips and said, "You mean to say you don't know how your great hero here got his leg wound? Why don't you ask him?"

Fancy's eyes remained cold and lightless, watching Bill, eyes like a statue's, devoid of life, of warmth, of curiosity; but watching Bill with a peculiar, narrowing intentness.

"We were supposed to take out a foot patrol," Bill said, speaking

quickly, desperately now, not knowing when his life was going to be abruptly cut off; determined to say this. "It was a dangerous mission. So Harry, here, decided he wanted no part of it. 'I want to get out of here; this is for crazy men,' I think were his exact words. So he went off somewhere and shot himself in the leg. Several of us covered up for him. I don't know why, but we did. Maybe we were glad to be rid of him. He wasn't much of a soldier anyway. He was a coward, or he was shrewd. Call it what you want. But other men died."

A silence filled the damp night air. The mist swirled and burned in the car's headlights that created a little pool of tense light in the pitch-dark woods. A multitude of flying insects swarmed and blundered into the two starkly glaring lights. Fancy continued his cold staring at Bill. The silence was broken by a harsh laugh from Harry Lawrence.

"See?" Harry said. "You told him. What did it get you?"

The shot rang out, the echo be-

ing swallowed almost instantly by the dark, hidden woods.

"And then he just got back into the car and drove off," Bill said as they walked along the platform next to the tracks. "He never even looked back. He just drove away and left me there to hike back to town. Harry died on the spot. He had the most startled expression on his face."

"It was because of his brother—Fancy's brother," Lynn said. "Harry must have forgot about that, or else he'd never have let you tell it. Fancy worshipped his brother. The brother was killed in Korea, after volunteering for a dangerous mission."

"The police said I'll have to come back when they catch up to him," Bill said, putting his bag down on the platform.

"Don't wait for that," Lynn said. "Come back sooner if you get lonely."

"If? I've already begun to feel lonely," Bill said as they heard the train whistling down the tracks.



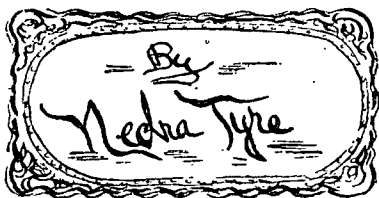
Anniversaries are usually conducive to compliments, pink champagne and happy recollections of the past. This one ended in an unscheduled turn of events for a nostalgic evening.

JOHN JOHNSON knew that he must murder his wife. He had to. It was the only decent thing he could do. He owed her that much consideration.

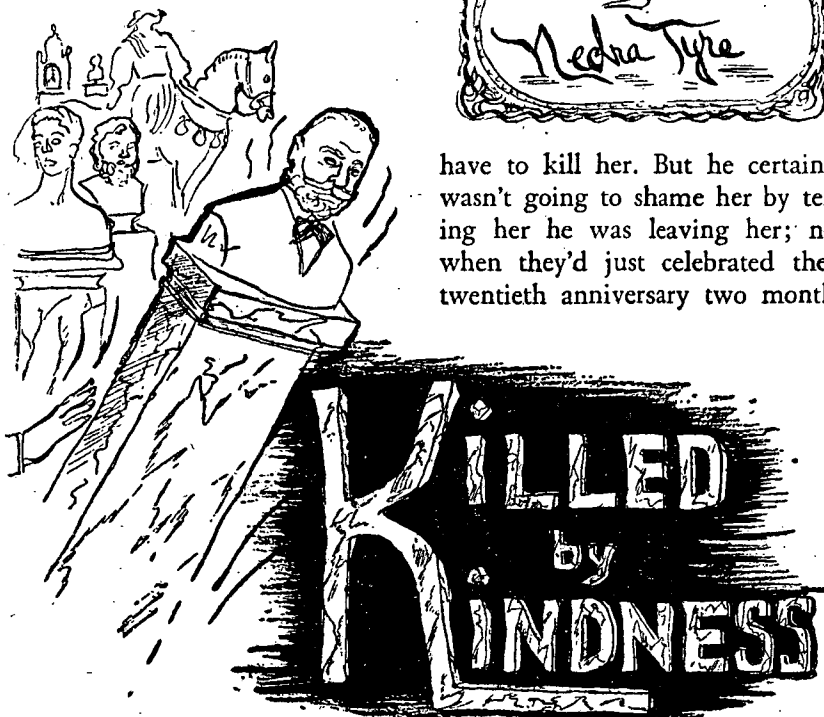
Divorce was out of the question. He had no grounds. Mary was kind and pretty and pleasant company and hadn't ever glanced at

another man. Not once in their marriage had she nagged him. She was a marvelous cook and an excellent bridge player. No hostess in town was more popular.

It seemed a pity that he would



have to kill her. But he certainly wasn't going to shame her by telling her he was leaving her; not when they'd just celebrated their twentieth anniversary two months



before and had congratulated each other on being the happiest married couple in the whole world. With pink champagne, and in front of dozens of admiring friends, they had pledged undying love. They had said they hoped fate would be kind and would allow them to die together. After all that John couldn't just toss Mary aside. Such a trick would be the action of a cad.

Without him Mary would have no life at all. Of course she would have her shop which had done well since she had opened it, but she wasn't a real career woman. Opening the shop had been a kind of lark when the Greer house, next door to them in a row of town houses, had been put up for sale. No renovation or remodeling had been done except to knock down part of a wall so that the two houses could be connected by a door. The furniture shop was only something to occupy her time, Mary said, while her sweet husband worked. It didn't mean anything to her, though she had a good business sense. John seldom went in the shop. Come to think of it, it was a jumble. It made him a little uneasy; everything in it seemed so crowded and precarious.

Yes, Mary's interest was in him; it wasn't in the shop. She'd have to have something besides the shop

to have any meaningful existence.

If he divorced her she'd have no one to take her to concerts and plays. Dinner parties, her favorite recreation, would be out. None of their friends would invite her to come without him. Alone and divorced, she would be shunted into the miserable category of spinsters and widows who had to be invited to lunch instead of dinner.

He couldn't relegate Mary to such a life, though he felt sure that if he asked her for a divorce she'd give him one. She was so acquiescent and accommodating.

No, he wasn't going to humiliate her by asking for a divorce. She deserved something better from him than that.

If only he hadn't met Lettice on that business trip to Lexington. But how could he regret such a miracle? He had come alive only in the six weeks since he'd known Lettice. Life with Mary was ashes in comparison. Since he'd met Lettice he felt like a blind man who had been given sight. He might have been deaf all his life and was hearing for the first time. And the marvel was that Lettice loved him and was eager to marry him, and free to marry him.

And waiting.

And insisting.

He must concentrate on putting Mary out of the way. Surely a little

accident could be arranged without too much trouble. The shop ought to be an ideal place, there in all that crowded junk. Among those heavy marble busts and chandeliers and andirons something from above or below could be used to dispatch his dear Mary to her celestial reward.

"Darling, you must tell your wife," Lettice urged when they next met at their favorite hotel in Lexington. "You've got to arrange for a divorce. You have to. You've got to tell her about us." Lettice's voice was so low and musical that John felt hypnotized.

But how could he tell Mary about Lettice?

John couldn't even rationalize Lettice's appeal to himself.

Instead of Mary's graciousness, Lettice had elegance. Lettice wasn't as pretty or as charming as Mary. But he couldn't resist her. In her presence he was an ardent, masterful lover; in Mary's presence he was a thoughtful, complaisant husband. With Lettice life would always be lived at the highest peak; nothing in his long years with Mary could approach the wonder he had known during his few meetings with Lettice. Lettice was earth, air, fire and water, the four elements; Mary was—no, he could-

n't compare them. Anyway, what good was it to set their attractions off against each other?

Then, just as he was about to suggest to Lettice that they go to the bar, he saw Chet Fleming enter the hotel and walk across the lobby toward the desk. What was Chet Fleming doing in Lexington? But then anyone could be anywhere. That was the humiliating risk illicit lovers faced. They might be discovered anywhere, anytime. No place was secure for them. But Chet Fleming was the one person he wanted least to see, and the one who would make the most of encountering John with another woman. That blabbermouth would tell his wife and friends, his doctor, his grocer, his banker, his lawyer. Word would get back to Mary. Her heart would be broken. She deserved better than that.

John cowered beside Lettice. Chet dawdled at the desk. John couldn't be exposed like that any longer, a single glance around and Chet would see him and Lettice. John made an incoherent excuse, then sidled over to the newsstand where he hid behind a magazine until Chet had registered and had taken an elevator upstairs.

Anyway, they had escaped, but only barely.

John couldn't risk cheapening their attachment. He had to do

something to make it permanent right away, but at the same time he didn't want to hurt Mary.

Thousands of people in the United States had gotten up that morning who would be dead before nightfall. Why couldn't his dear Mary be among them? Why couldn't she die without having to be murdered?

When John rejoined Lettice and tried to explain his panic, she was composed but concerned and emphatic.

"Darling, this incident only proves what I've been insisting. I said you'd have to tell your wife at once. We can't go on like this. Surely you understand."

"Yes, dear, you're quite right. I'll do something as soon as I can."

"You must do something immediately, darling."

Oddly enough, Mary Johnson was in the same predicament as John Johnson. She had had no intention of falling in love. In fact, she thought she was in love with her husband. How naive she'd been before Kenneth came into her shop that morning asking whether she had a bust of Mozart. Of course she had a bust of Mozart; she had several busts of Mozart, not to mention Bach, Beethoven, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Shakespeare, George

Washington and Goethe, in assorted sizes.

He had introduced himself. Customers didn't ordinarily introduce themselves, and she gave him her name in return, and then realized that he was the outstanding interior designer in town.

"Quite frankly," he said, "I wouldn't be caught dead with this bust of Mozart and it will ruin the room, but my client insists on having it. Do you mind if I see what else you have?"

She showed him all over the shop then. Later she tried to recall the exact moment when they had fallen in love. He had spent all that first morning there; toward noon he seemed especially attracted to a small back room cluttered and crowded with chests of drawers. He reached for a drawer pull that came off in his hands, then he reached for her.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said. "Goodness, suppose some customers come in."

"Let them browse," he said.

She couldn't believe that it had happened, but it had. Afterward, instead of being lonely when John went out of town on occasional business trips, she yearned for the time when he gave her his anti-septic peck of a kiss and told her he would be gone overnight.

The small back room jammed

with the chests of drawers became Mary's and Kenneth's discreet rendezvous. They added a chaise longue.

One day a voice reached them there. They had been too engrossed to notice that anyone had approached.

"Mrs. Johnson, where are you? I'd like some service, please."

Mary stumbled out from the dark to greet the customer. Mary tried to smooth her mussed hair. She knew that her lipstick was smeared.

The customer was Mrs. Bryan, the most accomplished gossip in town. Mrs. Bryan would get word around that Mary Johnson was carrying on scandalously in her shop. John was sure to find out now.

Fortunately, Mrs. Bryan was preoccupied. She was in a Pennsylvania Dutch mood and wanted to see butter molds and dower chests.

It was a lucky escape, as Mary later told Kenneth. Kenneth refused to be reassured.

"I love you deeply," he said. "And honorably. I've reason to know you love me, too. I'm damned tired of sneaking around. I'm not going to put up with it any longer. Do you understand? We've got to get married. Tell your husband you want a divorce."

Kenneth kept talking about a divorce, as if a divorce was nothing

at all—no harder to arrange than a dental appointment. How could she divorce a man who had been affectionate and kind and faithful for twenty years? How could she snatch happiness from him?

If only John would die. Why couldn't he have a heart attack? Every day thousands of men died from heart attacks. Why couldn't her darling John just drop dead? It would simplify everything.

Even the ringing of the telephone sounded angry, and when Mary answered it Kenneth, at the other end of the line, was in a rage.

"Damn it, Mary, this afternoon was ridiculous. It was insulting. I'm not skulking any more. I'm not hiding behind doors while you grapple around for butter molds to show customers. We've got to be married right away."

"Yes, darling. Do be patient."

"I've already been too patient. I'm not waiting any longer."

She knew that he meant it. If she lost Kenneth life would end for her. She hadn't ever felt this way about John.

Dear John. How could she toss him aside? He was in the prime of life; he could live decades longer. All his existence was centered on her. He lived to give her pleasure. They had no friends except other married people. John would have to lead a solitary life if she left

him. He'd be odd man out without her; their friends would invite him to their homes because they were sorry for him. Poor, miserable John was what everyone would call him. He'd be better off dead, they'd say. He would neglect himself; he wouldn't eat regularly; he would have to live alone in some wretched furnished apartment. No, she mustn't condemn him to an existence like that.

Why had this madness with Kenneth started? Why had that foolish woman insisted on having a bust of Mozart in her music room? Why had Kenneth come to her shop in search of it when busts of Mozart were in every second hand store on Broad Street and at much cheaper prices?

Yet she wouldn't have changed anything. Seconds with Kenneth were worth lifetimes with John.

Only one end was possible. She would have to think of a nice, quick, efficient, unmessy way to get rid of John.

And soon.

John had never seen Mary look as lovely as she did that night when he got home from his business trip. For one flicker of a second, life with her seemed enough. Then he thought of Lettice, and the thought stunned him into the be-

lief that no act that brought them together could be criminal. He must get on with what he had to do. He must murder Mary in as gentlemanly a way as possible, and he must do it that very night. Meantime he would enjoy the wonderful dinner Mary had prepared for him. Common politeness demanded it, and anyhow he was ravenous.

Yes, he must get on with the murder just as soon as he finished eating. It seemed a little heartless to be contriving a woman's death even as he ate her cheese cake, but he certainly didn't mean to be callous.

He didn't know just how he would murder Mary. Perhaps if he could get her into her shop, there in that corner where all the statuary was, he could manage something.

Mary smiled at him and handed him a cup of coffee.

"I thought you'd need lots of coffee, darling, after such a long drive."

"Yes, dear, I do. Thank you."

Just as he began to sip from his cup he glanced across the table at Mary. Her face had a peculiar expression. John was puzzled by it. They had been so close for so many years that she must be reading his mind. She must know what he was planning. Then she smiled;

it was the glorious smile she had bestowed on him ever since their honeymoon. Everything was all right.

"Darling, excuse me for a minute," she said. "I just remembered something in the shop that I must see to. I'll be right back."

She walked quickly out of the dining room and across the hall into the shop.

But she didn't come back right away as she'd promised. If she didn't return soon John's coffee would be cold. He took a sip or two, then decided to go to the shop to see what had delayed Mary.

She didn't hear him enter. He found her in the middle room where the chandeliers were blazing. Her back was turned toward him and she was sitting on an Empire sofa close to the statues on their stands. She was ambushed by the statues.

Good lord, it was as he had suspected. She had been reading his thoughts. Her shoulders heaved. She was sobbing. She knew that their life together was ending. Then he decided that she might be laughing. Her shoulders would be shaking like that if she were laughing to herself. Whatever she was doing, whether she sobbed or laughed, it was no time for him to speculate on her mood. This was too good a chance to miss. With



her head bent over she would be directly in the path of the bust of Victor Hugo or Benjamin Franklin or whoever it was towering above her. John would have to topple it only slightly and it would hit her skull. It needed only the gentlest shove.

He shoved.

It was so simple.

Poor darling girl. Poor Mary.

But it was all for the best and he wouldn't ever blame himself for what he'd done. Still, he was startled that it had been so easy, and it had taken no time at all. He would have tried it weeks before if he had known that it could be done with so little trouble.

John was quite composed. He took one last affectionate glance at Mary and then went back to the dining room. He would drink his coffee and then telephone the doc-

tor. No doubt the doctor would offer to notify the police since it was an accidental death. John wouldn't need to lie about anything except for one slight detail. He would have to say that some movement of Mary's must have caused the bust to fall.

His coffee was still warm. He drank it unhurriedly. He thought of Lettice. He ached for the luxury of telephoning her that their life together was now assured and that after a discreet interval they could be married. But he decided he had better not take any chances. He would delay calling Lettice.

He felt joyful yet calm. He couldn't remember having felt so relaxed. No doubt it came from the relief of having done what had to be done. He was even sleepy. He was sleepier than he had ever been. He must lie down on the living room couch. That was more urgent even than telephoning the doctor. But he couldn't wait to get to the couch. He laid his head on the dining table. His arms dangled.

None of Mary's and John's

friends had any doubt about how the double tragedy had occurred. When they came to think of it, the shop had always been a booby trap, and that night Mary had tripped or stumbled and had toppled the statue onto her head. Then John had found her and grief had overwhelmed him. He realized he couldn't live without Mary, and his desperate sense of loss had driven him to dissolve enough sleeping tablets in his coffee to kill himself.

They all remembered so well how, in the middle of their last anniversary celebration, Mary and John had said they hoped they could die together. They really were the most devoted couple any of them had ever known. You could get sentimental just thinking about Mary and John, and to see them together was an inspiration. In a world of insecurity nothing was so heartening as their deep, steadfast love. It was sweet and touching that they had died on the same night, and exactly as they both had wanted.



Rules are made to be broken so they say, but deviation from the rule may also produce a devastating surprise.



THE FIRST ENVELOPE arrived on a Tuesday. This marked it as slightly atypical from the start, as Myron Hettinger received very little mail at his office on Tuesdays. Letters mailed on Fridays arrived Monday morning, and letters mailed on Monday, unless dispatched rather early in the day, did not arrive until Wednesday, or at the earliest on Tuesday afternoon. This envelope, though, arrived Tuesday morning. John Palmer brought it into Myron Hettinger's office a few minutes past ten, along with the other mail. Like the other envelopes, it was unopened. Only Myron Hettinger opened Myron Hettinger's mail.

The rest of the mail, by and large, consisted of advertisements and solicitations of one sort or another. Myron Hettinger opened them in turn, studied them very briefly, tore them once in half and threw them into the wastebasket. When he came to this particular envelope, however, he paused momentarily.

He studied it. It bore his address. The address had been typed in a

rather ordinary type-face. It bore, too, a Sunday evening postmark. It bore a four-cent stamp commemorating the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the founding of a land grant college in the Midwest. It did not bear a return address or any other hint as to who had sent it or what might be contained therein.

Myron Hettinger opened the envelope. There was no letter inside. There was instead a photograph of two partially clad persons. One of them was a man who looked to be in his early fifties, balding, perhaps fifteen pounds overweight, with a narrow nose and rather thin lips. The man was with a woman who looked to be in her middle twenties, blonde, small-boned, smiling, and extraordinarily attractive. The man was Myron Hettinger, and the woman was Sheila Bix.

For somewhere between fifteen and thirty seconds, Myron Hettinger looked at the picture. Then he placed it upon the top of his desk and walked to the door of his office, which he locked. Then he returned to his desk, sat down in his straight-backed chair, and made sure that the envelope contained nothing but the photograph. After assuring himself of this, he tore the photograph twice in half, did as much with the envelope, placed the various scraps of paper and film in

his ashtray, and set them aflame.

A less stable man might have ripped photo and envelope into an inestimable number of shreds, scattered the shreds to four or more winds, and crouched in mute terror behind his heavy desk. Myron Hettinger was stable. The photograph was not a threat but merely the promise of a threat, a portent of probable future menace. Fear could wait until the threat itself came to the fore.

A more whimsical man might have pasted the photograph in his scrapbook, or might have saved it as a memory piece. Myron Hettinger was not whimsical; he had no scrapbook and kept no memorabilia.

The fire in the ashtray had a foul odor. After it ceased to burn, Myron Hettinger turned on the air conditioner. The room was cleared of the odor in less than ten minutes.

The second envelope arrived two days later in Thursday morning's mail. Myron Hettinger had been expecting it, with neither bright anticipation nor with any real fear. He found it among a heavy stack of letters. The envelope was the same as the first. The address was the same, the type-face appeared to be the same, and the stamp, too, was identical with the stamp on the first envelope. The postmark

was different, which was not surprising.

This envelope contained no photograph. Instead it contained an ordinary sheet of cheap stationery on which someone had typed the following message:

Get one thousand dollars in ten and twenty dollar bills. Put them in a package and put the package in a locker in the Times Square station of the IRT. Put the key in an envelope and leave it at the desk of the Slocum Hotel addressed to Mr. Jordan. Do all this today or a photo will be sent to your wife. Do not go to the police. Do not hire a detective. Do not do anything stupid.

The final three sentences of the unsigned letter were quite unnecessary. Myron Hettinger had no intention of going to the police, or of engaging the services of a detective. Nor did he intend to do anything stupid.

After letter and envelope had been burned, after the air conditioner had cleared the small room of its odor, Myron Hettinger stood at his window, looking out at East Forty-Third Street and thinking. The letter bothered him considerably more than the photograph had bothered him. It was a threat. It might conceivably intrude upon the balanced perfection of his

life. This he couldn't tolerate.

Until the letter had arrived, Myron Hettinger's life had indeed been perfect. His work was perfect, to begin with. He was a certified public accountant, self-employed, and he earned a considerable amount of money every year by helping various persons and firms pay somewhat less in the way of taxes than they might have paid without his services. His marriage, too, was perfect. His wife, Eleanor, was two years his junior, kept his home as he wanted it kept, cooked perfect meals, kept him company when he wished her company, let him alone when he wished to be alone, kept her slightly prominent nose out of his private affairs, and was the beneficiary of a trust fund which paid her in the neighborhood of twenty-five thousand dollars per year.

Finally, to complete this picture of perfection, Myron Hettinger had a perfect mistress. This woman, of course, was the woman pictured in the unpleasant photograph. Her name was Sheila Bix. She provided comfort, both physical and emotional, she was the essence of discretion, and her demands were minimal—rent for her apartment, a small sum for incidentals, and an occasional bonus for clothing.

A perfect career, a perfect wife,

a perfect mistress. This blackmailer, this *Mr. Jordan*, now threatened all three components of Myron Hettinger's perfect life. If the damnable photograph got into Mrs. Hettinger's hands, she would divorce him. He was very certain of this. If the divorce were scandalous, as it well might be, his business would suffer. And if all of this happened, it was quite likely that, for one reason or another, he would wind up losing Sheila Bix as well.

Myron Hettinger closed his eyes and drummed his fingers upon his desk top. He did not want to hurt his business, did not want to lose wife or mistress. His business satisfied him, as did Eleanor and Sheila. He did not *love* either Eleanor or Sheila, not any more than he *loved* his business. Love, after all, is an imperfect emotion. So is hate. Myron Hettinger did not hate this Mr. Jordan, much as he would have enjoyed seeing the man dead.

But what could he do?

There was, of course, one thing and only one thing that he could do. At noon he left his office, went to his bank, withdrew one thousand dollars in tens and twenties, packed them neatly in a cigar box, and deposited the box in a locker in the Times Square station of the IRT. He tucked the locker key into an envelope, addressed the en-

velope to the annoying Mr. Jordan, left the envelope at the desk of the Slocum Hotel, and returned to his office without eating lunch. Later in the day, perhaps because of Mr. Jordan or perhaps because of the missed meal, Myron Hettinger had a rather severe case of heartburn. He took bicarbonate of soda.

The third envelope arrived a week to the day after the second. Thereafter, for four weeks, Myron Hettinger received a similar envelope every Thursday morning. The letters within varied only slightly. Each letter asked for a thousand dollars. Each letter directed that he go through the rather complicated business of putting money in locker and leaving locker key at hotel desk. The letters differed each from the other only as to the designated hotel.

Three times Myron Hettinger followed the instructions to the letter. Three times he went to his bank, then to the subway station, then to the appointed hotel, and finally back to his office. Each time he missed lunch, and each time, probably as a direct result, he had heartburn. Each time he remedied it with bicarbonate of soda.

Things were becoming routine.

Routine in and of itself was not unpleasant. Myron Hettinger pre-

ferred order. He even devoted a specific page of his personal books to his account with the intrusive Mr. Jordan, listing each thousand-dollar payment the day it was paid. There were two reasons for this. First of all, Myron Hettinger never let an expenditure go unrecorded. His books were always in order and they always balanced. And secondly, there was somewhere in the back of his mind the faint hope that these payments to Mr. Jordan could at least be deducted from his income taxes.

Aside from his Thursday ventures, Myron Hettinger's life stayed pretty much as it had been. He did his work properly, spent two evenings a week with Sheila Bix, and spent five evenings a week with his wife.

He did not mention the blackmail to his wife, of course. Not even an idiot could have done this. Nor did he mention it to Sheila Bix. It was Myron Hettinger's firm conviction that personal matters were best discussed with no one. He knew, and Mr. Jordan knew, and that already was too much. He had no intention of enlarging this circle of knowledgable persons if he could possibly avoid it.

When the sixth of these letters arrived—the seventh envelope in all from Mr. Jordan—Myron Hettinger locked his office door,

burned the letter, and sat at his desk in deep thought. He did not move from his chair for almost a full hour. He did not fidget with desk-top gadgets. He did not doodle.

He thought.

This routine, he realized, could not possibly continue. While he might conceivably resign himself to suffering once a week from heartburn, he could not resign himself to the needless expenditure of one thousand dollars per week. One thousand dollars was not a tremendous amount of money to Myron Hettinger. Fifty-two thousand dollars was, and one did not need the mind of a certified public accountant to determine that weekly payments of one thousand dollars would run into precisely such a sum yearly. The payments, then, had to stop.

This could be accomplished in one of two ways. The blackmailer could be allowed to send his wretched photograph to Myron Hettinger's perfect wife, or he could be caused to stop his blackmailing. The first possibility seemed dreadful in its implications, as it had seemed before. The second seemed impossible.

He could, of course, appeal to his blackmailer's nobler instincts by including a plaintive letter with his payments. Yet this seemed po-

tentially useless. Having no nobler instincts of his own, Myron Hettinger was understandably unwilling to attribute such instincts to the faceless Mr. Jordan.

What else?

Well, he could always kill Mr. Jordan.

This seemed to be the only solution, the only way to check this impossible outflow of cash. It also seemed rather difficult to bring off. It is hard to kill a man without knowing who he is, and Myron Hettinger had no way of finding out more about the impertinent Mr. Jordan. He could not lurk at the appointed hotel; Mr. Jordan, knowing him, could simply wait him out before putting in an appearance. Nor could he lurk near the subway locker, for the same reason.

And how on earth could you kill a man without either knowing him or meeting him?

Myron Hettinger's mind leaped back to an earlier thought, the thought of appealing to the man's nobler instincts through a letter. Then daylight dawned. He smiled the smile of a man who had solved a difficult problem through the application of sure and perfect reasoning.

That day, Myron Hettinger left his office at noon. He did not go to

his bank, however. Instead he went to several places, among them a chemical supply house, a five-and-dime, and several drugstores. He was careful not to buy more than one item at any one place. We need not concern ourselves with the precise nature of his purchases. He was buying the ingredients for a bomb, and there is no point in telling the general public how to make bombs.

He made his bomb in the stall of a public lavatory, using as its container the same sort of cigar box in which he normally placed one thousand dollars in ten and twenty dollar bills. The principle of the bomb was simplicity itself. The working ingredient was nitroglycerine, a happily volatile substance which would explode upon the least provocation. A series of devices so arranged things that, were the cover of the cigar box to be lifted, enough hell would be raised to raise additional hell in the form of an explosion. If the box were not opened, but were dropped or banged, a similar explosion would occur. This last provision existed in the event that Mr. Jordan might suspect a bomb at the last moment and might drop the thing and run off. It also existed because Myron Hettinger could not avoid it. If you drop nitroglycerine, it explodes.

Once the bomb was made, Myron Hettinger did just what he always did. He went to the Times Square IRT station and deposited the bomb very gently in a locker. He took the key, inserted it in an envelope on which he had inscribed Mr. Jordan's name, and left the envelope at the desk of the Blackmore Hotel. Then he returned to his office. He was twenty minutes late this time.

He had difficulty keeping his mind on his work that afternoon. He managed to list the various expenses he had incurred in making the bomb on the sheet devoted to payments made to Mr. Jordan, and he smiled at the thought that he would be able to mark the account closed by morning. But he had trouble doing much else that day. Instead he sat and thought about the beauty of his solution.

The bomb would not fail. There was enough nitroglycerine in the cigar box to atomize not only Mr. Jordan but virtually anything within twenty yards of him, so the blackmailer could hardly hope to escape. There was the possibility—indeed, one might say the probability—that a great many persons other than Mr. Jordan might die. If the man was fool enough to open his parcel in the subway station, or if he was clumsy enough to drop it there, the carnage would

be dreadful. If he took it home with him and opened it in the privacy of his own room or apartment, considerably less death and destruction seemed likely to occur.

But Myron Hettinger could not have cared less about how many persons Mr. Jordan carried with him to his grave. Men or women or children, he was sure he could remain totally unconcerned about their untimely deaths. If Mr. Jordan died, Myron Hettinger would survive. It was that simple.

At five o'clock, a great deal of work undone, Myron Hettinger got to his feet. He left his office and stood for a moment on the sidewalk, breathing stuffy air and considering his situation. He did not want to go home now, he decided. He had done something magnificent, he had solved an unsolvable problem, and he felt a need to celebrate.

An evening with Eleanor, while certainly comfortable, did not impress him as much of a celebration. An evening with Sheila Bix seemed far more along the lines of what he wanted. Yet he hated to break established routine. On Mondays and on Fridays he went to Sheila Bix's apartment. All other nights he went directly home.

Still, he had already broken one routine that day, the unhappy routine of payment. And why not do

in another routine, if just for one night?

He called his wife from a pay phone. "I'll be staying in town for several hours," he said. "I didn't have a chance to call you earlier."

"You usually come home on Thursdays," she said.

"I know. Something's come up."

His wife did not question him, nor did she ask just what it was that had come up. She was the perfect wife. She told him that she loved him, which was quite probably true, and he told her that he loved her, which was most assuredly false. Then he replaced the receiver and stepped to the curb to hail a taxi. He told the driver to take him to an apartment building on West Seventy-Third Street just a few doors from Central Park.

The building was an unassuming one, a remodeled brownstone with four apartments to the floor. Sheila's apartment, on the third floor, rented for only one hundred twenty dollars per month, a very modest rental for what the tabloids persist in referring to as a love nest. This economy pleased him, but then it was what one would expect from the perfect mistress.

There was no elevator. Myron Hettinger climbed two flights of stairs and stood slightly but not terribly out of breath in front of Sheila Bix's door. He knocked on

the door and waited. The door was not answered. He rang the bell, something he rarely did. The door was still not answered.

Had this happened on a Monday or on a Friday, Myron Hettinger might have been understandably piqued. It had never happened on a Monday or on a Friday. Now, though, he was not annoyed. Since Sheila Bix had no way of knowing that he was coming, he could hardly expect her to be present.

He had a key, of course. When a man has the perfect mistress, or even an imperfect one, he owns a key to the apartment for which he pays the rent. He used this key, opened the door and closed it behind him. He found a bottle of scotch and poured himself the drink which Sheila Bix poured for him every Monday and every Friday. He sat in a comfortable chair and sipped the drink, waiting for the arrival of Sheila Bix and dwelling both on the pleasant time he would have after she arrived and on the deep satisfaction to be derived from the death of the unfortunate Mr. Jordan.

It was twenty minutes to six when Myron Hettinger entered the comfortable, if inexpensive apartment, and poured himself a drink. It was twenty minutes after six when he heard footsteps on the stairs and then heard a key being

fitted into a lock. He opened his mouth to let out a hello, then stopped. He would say nothing, he decided. And she would be surprised.

This happened.

The door opened. Sheila Bix, a blonde vision of loveliness, tripped merrily into the room with shining eyes and the lightest of feet. Her arms were extended somewhat oddly. This was understandable, for she was balancing a parcel upon her pretty head much in the manner of an apprentice model balancing a book as part of a lesson in poise.

It took precisely as long for Myron Hettinger to recognize the box upon her head as it took for Sheila Bix to recognize Myron Hettinger. Both reacted nicely. Myron Hettinger put two and two together with

speed that made him a credit to his profession. Sheila Bix performed a similar feat, although she came up with a somewhat less perfect answer.

Myron Hettinger did several things. He tried to get out of the room. He tried to make the box stay where it was, poised precariously upon that pretty and treacherous head. And, finally, he made a desperate lunge to catch the box before it reached the floor, once Sheila Bix had done the inevitable, recoiling in horror and spilling the box from head through air.

His lunge was a good one. He left his chair in a single motion. His hands reached out, groping for the falling cigar box.

There was a very loud noise, but Myron Hettinger only heard the beginnings of it.

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*Dear Fans:*

*My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:*

*Membership dues are fifty cents which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.*

*Most sincerely,  
Pat Hitchcock  
Tarzana, California*

P. O. Box 434

THE BOOKS ALWAYS BALANCE

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*Placid-appearing professors may have infernos of their own which are far more encompassing than Dante's and Medieval Literature.*



**P**ROFESSOR HOWARD HOLLIS, as he presided over his Survey of Medieval Literature class, was a lonely man. At least one reason for his loneliness was the fact that at Western Poly, a college busily turning out scientists and technicians, Medieval Literature was hardly a popular subject. Half a dozen students sat before him, heads bent, scribbling in their notebooks as his monotonous voice droned on about Dante and his Inferno.

Howard Hollis spoke absently, distractedly, but since he had taught the subject for a dozen years, he knew his material by heart. He lived, and was living

at this moment, in an Inferno of his own, and his thoughts were as dark and painful as Dante's. And his torment always reached its fever pitch at this hour, four o'clock on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in Medieval Lit. Because

of youth had bubbled high inside him, girls who had really been beautiful, and he had felt no compelling attraction. As before a painting or a statue, he might have admired their beauty, but he had never gone beyond that. But Ro-



Rowena Stanley attended this class.

He didn't stare at her. That would have been the obvious thing, noticed and scorned by the other students, and so far, at least, he had managed to avoid the obvious. But he had a perfect right to glance at her now and then, as he glanced at the others. Impersonally. Just in passing. He glanced at her now, then quickly and guiltily away.

He had not been able to analyze the nature and all the reasons for his passion. Rowena Stanley could not be considered a beautiful girl. He had had other girls in his classes in the past, when the juices

wena was somehow, mysteriously, different.

He gave her another quick glance. She sat in the back tier of

A Novelette  
By  
C. B.  
Gilford

desks—her own choice lately—though there were plenty of empty closer seats. She had her legs crossed, her skirt carefully drawn over her knees. Her legs were good, feminine, but scarcely objects in themselves to send a man reeling. Her brown tweed suit was not new, not especially flattering. She did not dress to attract men, at least not in Professor Hollis' class. Her head was bent diligently over her notes. She was blonde, naturally, he was sure. But it wasn't just that. He'd had dozens of blondes in classes before. Rowena? The name? Scott's heroine. But Howard Hollis, at age forty, was certainly beyond the stage of being infatuated by a romantic name.

The class dragged on, an exquisite torture. What a ridiculous situation to be in, to anticipate these thrice weekly sessions with ecstatic expectations, like a lover impatiently awaiting a rendezvous, and then when the moment arrived, to be so frustrated and disappointed that the mere presence of his beloved was an agony and he desperately wanted her to be gone. He felt a sweat emerging on his brow, though the room had a wintry chill, and he clenched his fists in order to get a better grip on himself.

The Inferno. He lectured on

automatically, detailing the dreadful punishments of Dante's damned souls. How appropriate, he thought; he might have been describing his own anguish. He glanced frequently at his watch. The seconds were ticking by with the slowness of an eternity in hell. He wondered in a threatening panic if his strain were apparent. Possibly not. The heads remained bowed over the notebooks, including that blonde head whose errant tendrils formed a supernatural mist, a halo, over its owner. This madness could not go on!

It ended mercifully with the ringing of a faraway bell. His voice hummed mechanically to the end of his sentence, then finished abruptly with, "that'll be all for today." The students, except for Rowena, looked up at him in a kind of relief, and a chubby brown-haired girl gave him a vacant, perfunctory smile. No one stayed after time with a question. No one was that interested. They seldom were. They packed up books, donned coats that had lain over vacant chairs, and filed out, pretending not to be in a hurry, though they really were. Rowena went with the others, in the very middle of the group. Professor Hollis heard their chatter in the hallway. They weren't talking about Dante. Five o'clock Friday



afternoon, they were discussing week-end dates and activities. Possibly one of the young men was making a date with Rowena. She was not outstandingly popular as she was not outstandingly pretty, but on a predominantly male campus she received her share of attention.

Friday. He wouldn't see her again till Monday. Seventy-two hours. The relief of not having to be in the same room with her for another seventy-two hours. And the simultaneous pain of seventy-two hours of separation from one whose company he ardently wished to share.

Acting on impulse and not quite knowing his own intention, Howard Hollis struggled hastily into his topcoat, grabbed his briefcase and hat, and stalked out of the room. The hallway was empty. All that was left of his students was the dying echo of their retreating footsteps and their fading laughter. But he knew which way Rowena usually went and that was the direction he took now.

In the shadowy entrance of the old building he came to a sudden halt. Rowena was there at the bottom of the stone steps, chatting with not one, but two, young men. Stabbed by jealousy, Howard Hollis didn't know whether to change his mind and dash out the back

way, or to linger here, hoping.

But while he still debated between beating a cautious, wise retreat and plunging ahead into foolishness, Rowena's two young friends made off to the left toward the men's dorms and she herself headed straight across the campus. The temptation was now quite irresistible, and Howard succumbed to it.

By the time he was outside and down the steps, Rowena was fifty feet ahead of him. He did not want to yell for her to wait for him, and it would have been just as unseemly for a professor to be seen running in pursuit of a student. He forced himself to be content with a brisk stride, although, since he was a short man, this gait did not devour distances too rapidly.

The girl was walking fast also. The winter wind, coming at her from her right side, ruffled her blonde hair and molded her skirt and coat around her body. In her low-heeled shoes, her legs seemed more sturdy than willowy. Lithe, graceful, even athletic, she was certainly not the wispy, large-eyed, horn-rimmed-glasses, intellectual type that Professor Hollis might have been expected to gravitate toward. But logic and reason did not impel him now.

Abruptly she turned off to the

right. If she had bothered to look she might have noticed him, but she did not look. She took the path between the Engineering and the Physics building, but Howard did not dare accost her there. But then she left the sidewalks and headed toward the well known short-cut through the little patch of woods. High Street lay beyond, but almost a block distant. Many students who did not want to go all the way around to Fulton Avenue took the short-cut. Perhaps she wanted to do some quick shopping before returning to her boarding-house for dinner.

Dinner! He could catch up with her and invite her to dinner. That should certainly be within the bounds of propriety. She ought to crave a change from her boarding-house fare, and not many of the students could afford to take a co-ed to dinner.

In the early winter dusk she was lost from view the instant she entered the woods. But the path was well marked, and now that he was hidden from onlookers, Howard broke into a trot. This wasn't much of a woods really, and not very wild, merely a little tract that the college was saving for future development.

He almost stumbled into her in the dimness before he called out, "Rowena . . . Miss Stanley . . ."

The quick way she swung around and the pallor of her face told him that he'd startled her, and he hastened to apologize. "I'm sorry if I frightened you . . ."

"I'm not frightened." Her voice, ordinarily such a pleasant, throaty voice, had a quaver in it, and the words seemed more intended to reassure herself than him.

"I saw you take the short-cut. Or at least I thought it was you." The lie was transparent, and he was ashamed of his inability to make this encounter appear accidental. She was staring wide-eyed at him, obviously certain that he had followed her all the way from the classroom, and just as obviously apprehensive over that fact.

There was a long silence, with neither of them knowing what to say next. They stood in the midst of a larger silence. High Street would be full of cars and people, but their noise did not penetrate this far. Behind them, though closer, the campus was in a lull, the day classes having ended, and the few Friday evening classes not yet begun. The wood itself, devoid of wild life at this time of year, did not even yield the chirping of a bird.

This sudden solitude, this solitude in Rowena's company, sent Howard's pulse pounding, confused his mind, made him forget

the easy talk that was so hard for him to make in the best of circumstances, made him forget even that clever dinner invitation.

"I'm in a hurry," the girl said finally. But somehow she did not, or was not able to move. She had grown even paler in these moments, and all he could see of her was her dreadfully white face, like a disembodied mask, hanging there in the deepening darkness.

But her remark triggered in Howard a desire to dispense with the polite niceties and probe instead right to the fundamentals of things. "You're always in a hurry whenever I want to talk to you," he heard himself saying with a half-horror at his own boldness.

"I don't know what you mean." The girl at least still had the wit to parry.

He plunged on recklessly. "I've asked you to come to my office several times. We've made definite appointments, and I sat waiting, but you never came. You always said you'd forgotten, but then you forgot the new appointment too. Even in the corridors you avoid me. I've called to you, and you pretended not to hear. My dear girl, you must realize that a professor now and then must hold private conferences with students. That's the only way to really make sure what the student is learning,

how she is progressing. And you, Rowena, you are so wonderfully sensitive . . . I feel that little discussions could be so rewarding . . . I want to see my students grow in understanding and appreciation . . ."

He stopped. How asinine it all sounded, how hypocritical and untrue. This girl was intelligent. He could not convince her with patent lies.

"I have to go now," she said. But still she did not move, afraid possibly that if she tried to leave, he would stop her.

"Please!" He was begging her. "Why won't you talk to me? Why do you always have some excuse?" He was nakedly humble now, but he didn't care. At least he was speaking from the heart. "Why can't I be your friend?"

She was shaking her head. "You're a professor . . ."

"What difference does that make? Do those young fellows have more of a right to speak to you just because they're students? If I were a student, sitting next to you in class, would you speak to me then? Look, I'm a human being, a man, and you're an attractive girl. I'm respectable, I'm not married . . ."

"You're old!"

The way it sounded, coming from her lips, made age seem

something horrible, ugly, repulsive, an epithet of scorn and contempt and loathing. It was the equivalent of a slap in the face, the same kind of undeserved insult.

"I'm thirty-nine," he said quietly. It was only a small lie, since he was forty, and he hated himself for telling it. "I am not rich or handsome, but then some of your young fellows aren't either. But I know a lot more than they do. I've read hundreds more books. Don't judge me by my lectures. I know they're dull and stupid, but those are the things I'm expected to say. I wouldn't bore you if we were alone. I could be very interesting, and say so many clever things—I know I could—if I had you to listen to me. You could inspire me, Rowena, because I love you . . ."

When she tried to dart away from him, he seized her wrist and held her fast. She struggled in his grasp, but he found a masculine strength he hadn't known he possessed, and she was helpless against him.

"Let me go," she pleaded, her voice hoarse with fear. "If you let me go, I won't tell on you . . ."

"You won't tell whom? You won't tell what?" He'd drawn her close to him now, and he hissed these questions directly into her face. "What am I doing that's so

terrible? When you go out on dates, those boys hold you tighter than this. Why do you allow them to do things I can't do? Why must you treat me differently?"

She started to scream. No sound came out, but she opened her mouth, and the desire and necessity to scream glittered in her eyes. The threat of a scream lit the fuse of terror in Professor Howard Hollis, and his hands leaped to her throat in order to silence that scream.

The weight and thrust of his violence bore her to the ground. He fell with her, never relaxing his hold. One thing, and that one thing alone, was in his mind. A scream that would bring people running to see him, a professor, rebuffed by his student—that scream must never be uttered. His hands squeezed harder, and the face that had been so pale and white in the dusk grew mottled and dark.

Then, a long time after, when Rowena Stanley had ceased to move and struggle, when no part of her body resisted him any longer, he rose slowly and heavily to his feet. She did not follow him, but continued to lie there, silent and voiceless, a shapeless thing on the ground, somewhat darker than the surrounding shadows.

He stood motionless for a while,

trying to recover the rhythm of normal breathing. The confusion was clearing rapidly from his brain, and he was beginning to see the new and stark reality confronting him.

He, Howard Hollis, professor in good standing, had committed murder. He did not have to wonder whether the girl was dead. She was. She was lying there at his feet on a cold bed of damp, rotting leaves. He could see her nyloned legs, gleaming dully in the dark. And her eyes, wide open and staring up at him. And a book she had dropped, that had fallen open to reveal white pages fluttering in the wind.

"I'm sorry, Rowena," he whispered softly. "I didn't mean to." But he didn't love her any more. His love had fled when the last flicker of life had left the girl's body. Whatever Rowena had been, whatever it was he had loved her for, was gone now. One cannot love a dead, departed thing.

He was alive. He had made a terrible mistake that he now wished he could undo, but he was alive. Some instinct that was a part of his every nerve and cell kept reminding his brain of this paramount fact. Rowena was dead, beyond help, but he was alive. And he must go on living.

The deep primitive urges sent

frantic messages to his brain. Had anyone seen him entering the woods with the girl? No, he didn't think so. The campus was all but deserted at this hour. And even if someone had seen him, could that someone identify him? Probably not in the failing light.

But even if he could not definitely be placed at the scene of the crime, would anyone connect him in a general way with Rowena Stanley? Yes, this much was possible. He was her professor in Medieval Lit, of course. But there was more than that. He'd pursued the girl in his professorial way, trying to corner her in hallways, insisting upon appointments in his office. Very possibly—not certainly but possibly—she had confided her problem to somebody. Therefore he was in danger.

Alibi? It was too late for that now. If he had intended to murder the girl, he might have arranged something. But his had been an unpremeditated crime, completely spontaneous, emotional, in an unguarded, almost insane moment.

Insane! No, he wasn't that, nor had he been. He had very logically assessed the damage to his pride—and to his job at the college—that would have resulted from a foolish girl's scream. But supposing he had been an insane killer,

lusting after the girl, a savage predator denied his prey and raging over his disappointment? A madman sublimating his frustrated passion in an orgy of violence and revenge? What would such a man do? How would he kill? How could this crime be made to look, not like the work of a staid professor, but rather like the work of a demented monster?

Calmly Howard came to a conclusion. And calmly he came to a decision. Reaching into a pocket and fumbling there for a moment, he drew out finally a small and much soiled pen knife. It wasn't much of a knife, and certainly not a weapon. He carried it for one purpose only, to ream out the clogged bowl of his pipe. It would have to serve another purpose now, however.

He had no stomach for what he had to do, but he realized it was necessary. He knelt in the leaves and flipped out the blade of the knife. It was dull and not made for this work any more than he was. Still it served. The cuts it made were not deep, but the blood flowed, and that was the important thing. He slashed Rowena's forehead, her cheeks, her neck. And then her legs, right through the nylons. That was enough, he decided. There was too much blood already.

He stood up, aware that his position was still perilous. He had to take the knife home with him, because if he threw it away somewhere, it might be found and identified. He wrapped it in his handkerchief, stuffed it into his briefcase. That could be bloody too, as his hands might be, or other parts of his clothing. Certain things would have to be cleaned or destroyed. But he would have time if he could escape from the woods without being seen.

He chose to retrace his footsteps so as to emerge onto the campus. He was wise in this choice. The campus was almost deserted. He crossed it all the way to the library before he saw anyone. From there he kept right on going, straight to Mrs. Finch's boarding house, where it would behoove him not to be late for dinner.

The body was discovered that same evening, and the newspaper ran a huge headline in the morning. Howard skipped Saturday breakfast, sleeping late, as was his custom. Of course this morning he didn't sleep. He heard them all downstairs, discussing the newspaper story. When he went down at last, they were all preparing to go to the campus, and he went with them, so as not to seem suspiciously

uninterested, and thus conspicuous.

An enormous crowd was gathered there, students, faculty, townspeople, numbering perhaps in the thousands. They swarmed over the grassy areas and into the wood itself. If there had been such a thing as footprints, the crowd had conveniently trampled them.

The body had been removed long before, so the morbid-minded had missed that. But there were ample descriptions being circulated. All of them emphasized the horrible slashing. Some maintained that the body had been nude and violated. Everyone seemed to agree that the crime was certainly the work of a maniac. Delicious shudders of fear ran through the crowd.

Howard returned home well satisfied. At least no one had immediately gone to the police with the suggestion that Rowena's Medieval Lit professor might have murdered her. In due course, the police would question him, he was sure of that. But they would question everyone who had known Rowena. Quite natural.

Meanwhile he felt he had covered his trail pretty well. No one had seen him enter the house last night, and he'd dashed straight to his room and locked his door. A thorough examination of his accouterments revealed a fortunate fact. There was very little blood.

Soap and water took care of most of it, on the briefcase, his shoes, and his hands. There seemed to be no stains anywhere on his clothes, but he would re-examine these articles again and again, just to make sure. The handkerchief in which he'd wrapped the knife was red. He burned it in an ash tray, then flushed the remains down the toilet. The pen knife caused him some concern. Hiding it or losing it somewhere would force him to replace it with a new knife, and this small circumstance might be noticed and commented upon. He ended by washing and scraping the knife as best he could, and this process left no obvious stains. When he finished, he considered himself reasonably safe from detection by the route of chemical analysis of blood stains.

Lunch—Mrs. Finch served Saturday lunches to her clients, as she called them—again featured the topic of the murder. Since they had visited the campus, they could now speak with some authority.

Mrs. Finch presided over the discussion. She was in her fifties, an amiable woman, the widow of a professor, shrewd if not intelligent, portly and large-bosomed, but still physically able to do most of the work around the place. "The poor girl," Mrs. Finch said,

"the poor, poor girl. It must have been just dreadful."

"And so young," said Miss Jensen, a gaunt, grayed spinster of indeterminable age who worshipped the principle of youth. She was an assistant librarian.

"Nice girl, too," said Professor Trimble. Trimble taught mathematics, and had almost reached retirement age. His eyes weakened from long years of studying equations, he wore very thick-lensed spectacles.

"Did you know her?" Mrs. Finch asked avidly.

"I think so," Trimble replied. "Red-haired girl . . ."

"Blonde," Howard corrected him.

"Ah, yes!" Jules Manson's face lit up. Jules was young, dark, round-faced, bespectacled, small, not more than five-five or six, and slight in the bargain. But he was a terribly intense person. He was an instructor in psychology. "The Stanley girl was in your class, wasn't she, Howard?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact she was."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Mrs. Finch shrilled.

"I thought I had. Yes, she was in my Medieval Lit."

"Tell us about her. What kind of girl was she?"

"Just a girl. All coeds are rather

alike, aren't they? Or are they?"

"No two human beings are alike," Jules Manson interrupted.

"That's what makes psychology so fascinating."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. But I'm not concerned about the girl. As you say, all the coeds are *somewhat* alike. Twenty years old, fairly pretty, interested predominantly in men. Almost a category, you might say. The one who appeals to me, as a psychologist, is the killer. Now there's a rather special human being."

"What kind of fellow would he be?" Howard asked, really curious.

"A maniac!" Mrs. Finch put in.

"A fiend!" Miss Jensen added.

"After a fashion, yes," Jules agreed. "A murderer is unusual enough, you know. All of us feel like committing murder now and then, but most of us lack either the sheer courage or else the capacity for an emotion violent enough to trigger a murderous act. But this kind of courage and this kind of emotion, though unusual, are nevertheless normal. The slashing, however, indicates abnormality."

"What kind of abnormality?" Howard wanted to probe this matter. The police psychologist would probably theorize just like Jules.

"Well, I'd say this just offhand."



Jules liked to display his specialized knowledge, and this was his great opportunity. "Take a normal man. Granted that he has sufficient motive for murder, has the cold courage or the violent emotions, the act of murder itself and the destruction of the victim is quite enough to satisfy the murderer. If I had a wife, for instance, and thought she was unfaithful, and I killed her, the very process of killing and the fact she was dead would surely satisfy my jealousy. I wouldn't cut her up. What does this cutting signify? A disturbed mind, surely. But disturbed in what particular way? In this way. Murder wasn't enough. The act of strangulation didn't purge this man's emotions: The fact that Rowena Stanley was dead didn't satisfy his desire for revenge, didn't even the score. This killer wanted more. So he disfigured the corpse."

"How clever, Jules," Mrs. Finch said with genuine admiration.

"Routine," Jules answered airily. "But that isn't all."

"What's the rest?" Miss Jensen stared goggle-eyed.

"The question now remains," said Jules, "was the killer satisfied with the disfigurement of the corpse?"

After a long hush around the table, old Trimble put the question. "What do you mean there?"

Jules gazed over their heads at the abominable wallpaper. "I theorize now. Our man is a lonely fellow. Loneliness is almost always a factor in these cases. This is not a loneliness merely of the moment, of temporary circumstances. This chap is lonely by temperament, and possibly, also, as a result of an unfortunate childhood, a traumatic adolescence, and finally, a lack of any real achievement in the adult world, achievement which might have won him recognition and respect among his contemporaries. Add this up now, this long history of rejection. What is our man at present? He is a bachelor certainly. And a recluse. I don't mean he lives off in a cave somewhere. He sees people. He meets people. But he has no friends, no confidantes, of either sex. He suffers from a dreadful and complete loneliness. He has been rejected, rebuffed, shunted aside all his life. Now tell me, if you were such a man, would you have any affection for the human race?"

It was not an audience chosen well for such a question. Or perhaps it was an audience very well chosen. Mrs. Finch was the only person in the group who had ever married. Jensen was a spinster. Trimble and Howard were bachelors, and for that matter, so was Jules. Jensen was staring down at

her plate, rather embarrassed. Trimble blinked, his tired mind still fumbling with the question. Howard was vaguely disturbed in the midst of his elation over the success of his impersonation of a maniac.

"There are two possibilities in regard to the Stanley girl," Jules went on. "One is that the killer knew her, and she rejected him personally. The other is that she was a stranger to him, but he took his spite out on her as a representative of all humanity. One possibility is as likely as the other."

This reasoning suited Howard. The killer could have been someone who wasn't even acquainted with Rowena Stanley, who had never seen her before the time of the murder.

"But I ask you this," Jules pursued. "If our man bears such a deep grudge against humanity that he had to disfigure the corpse, has his resentment been satisfied with that act? Or . . ." He paused dramatically.

"... Will he strike again?"

"Preposterous!" Howard blurted it out before he thought.

Jules turned him a cool stare. "What makes you so sure of that, Howard?"

Howard came near to losing his nerve then, much nearer than he had last night in the woods, when

he'd realized he'd committed murder. "Well, I mean . . ." He looked around the table. They were all staring at him, waiting for his explanation. "I mean, no matter how large one's resentment might be, surely a murder should satisfy it."

"What about the slashing?"

"That should be rather satisfying too . . ."

"Or it could just possibly whet the killer's appetite for revenge."

Howard was trembling visibly, unable to control himself. "I still think you're wrong," he stammered.

"We'll see." Jules was enjoying himself immensely, feasting upon the sensation he'd created. And now for dessert he turned to Miss Jensen, dropping his voice to scarcely more than a whisper. "If I were a female in this town, I'd be mighty careful, at least till they catch this lad."

Jensen reacted perfectly. Turning very pale, she swooned.

Police Chief Abe Keegle took personal charge of the case. He was a balding, paunchy man, but he had piercing black eyes behind his rimless glasses that hinted of a shrewd intelligence. Also he was thorough.

Howard Hollis was questioned along with a dozen other professors who had had Rowena Stan-

ley, at one time or another, in their classes. Howard thought the questions themselves rather harmless, but he was wary of Keegle. He wasn't asked to provide an alibi, or anything so direct, but merely to give what information he had about the dead girl. But he suspected that Keegle was observing his general manner more than he was listening to the answers. Howard waited for the thunderbolt to strike—somebody had reported that Professor Hollis had paid rather special attention to Rowena Stanley, how about it? But this question was never asked. Of course, Keegle might have known things he wasn't revealing, but Howard felt much better after the interview anyway.

Something else disturbed him, however. A pathologist had subjected the corpse to a microscopic examination, according to the newspaper. The cuts had been made with a rather blunt knife. Which was curious, of course—if the killer wanted to slash his victim, why hadn't he brought along a good sharp knife for the purpose? Also, there was some strange material in the wounds. Chemical analysis determined that the substance was hardened tobacco tar, such as is found in the bowls of pipes. The killer was a pipe smoker, therefore, and had used the

knife with which he cleaned his pipe.

But how many pipe smokers were there on the campus? Dozens among the faculty. And pipes were always a popular undergraduate affectation. Not to mention possibly hundreds of townspeople. Not a very helpful clue certainly, and Howard decided to forget about it.

Meanwhile, Professor Jules Manson was interviewed by an enterprising reporter, and Jules gave the whole town the same opinion that he had given Mrs. Finch's clients. The maniac who had waylaid Miss Stanley would very possibly kill again. It might or might not have been good psychology, but it was successful journalism. The town—especially the womenfolk—was convulsed in fear.

Howard saw evidences of it wherever he went. No more was a coed seen walking alone on the campus, not even in broad daylight. In the town, there seemed fewer women in evidence generally, as if they were keeping to their homes and going out only when necessary. How stupid and unnecessary it all was, Howard kept thinking. He would like to assure the community that the killer would not strike again.

Of course he realized that Jules had actually played into his hands. Jules had swallowed the maniac

theory, enlarged upon it, popularized it. Let some detective worry about a dull knife soiled with tobacco tar as not being typical of a slashing maniac. Jules' theory, repeated often enough, would convince even that stubborn detective.

But if anybody was convinced, it was Jules himself. Having elaborated the theory, it was his brain child—the killer would kill again. Jules talked of nothing else—in his classes, according to report, and certainly at Mrs. Finch's table.

"There's one reason our maniac won't strike again," Howard proposed at dinner one evening.

"What's that?" Jules asked, pouncing.

"He won't have a chance."

"How do you mean?"

"There are simply no unescorted females wandering about."

Which was quite true, Jules had to admit. Miss Jensen was a case in point. Jules himself, Howard, even old Trimble, were being regularly dragooned into providing convoy across the campus for poor Jensen. And when her fellow boarders weren't available, the librarian bribed students by doing bits of research for them. Jensen was an hysterical, but typical example.

Jules, however, was loath to accept this as final. "It won't last," he predicted. "Naturally the man is lying low at the moment, because

he doesn't have an opportunity. This state of siege can't last forever though. Women will begin to get careless, and finally they'll forget entirely. People have short memories."

"I won't get careless, and I won't forget," Jensen promised.

"Others will. The man will have another chance eventually."

"He might move on," Howard suggested, "to where the fields are greener. He might have been a transient in the first place."

"Perhaps," Jules conceded. Obviously he would be unhappy if his theory did not prove out with a second murder.

But Howard's prediction was fast coming true. Even such a sensational item as a grisly murder can't retain the public interest indefinitely. There'd been a chapel memorial service for the dead girl—the real funeral took place in Rowena's home town—which had been well attended, and had provided a new stimulus to fear. But the great surge of terror had subsided. Coeds were only too happy to accept male escort on every possible occasion. But this was not always convenient. Now and then they could be seen making short dashes between buildings. None of them did this after dark, of course, and none ventured near the woods at any time.

Abe Keegle had organized a group of special auxiliary patrolmen for night duty, so he apparently shared Jules' opinion that danger still lurked. These fellows were armed, and went about on foot. There were more uniformed cops in evidence too, and undoubtedly there were plainclothes men in strategic places.

Howard took to strolling about the campus and surrounding neighborhoods, constantly amazed at what his hand had wrought, and rather enjoying his secret knowledge that all of these precautions were futile. No one questioned his movements, of course, since he was a man, and no one, not even Jules, had ever suggested that the male population was in any danger.

It was on one of these strolls—two and a half weeks after the crime and when people were beginning to think and talk about other subjects—that Howard was startled by a strange and unusual sight. The time was eight o'clock, hardly late by normal standards, but more than two hours after dark and considerably late by the standards of this fear-haunted college town. The night was cloudy, damp, unpleasant, with patches of ground fog eddying about and half obscuring the glow of the street lamps. And it was in this

grim setting that he saw the girl.

For a ghastly moment he even imagined that it was Rowena Stanley. As she passed under one of the lamps, her head, uncovered even in this chilly weather, shone bright and blonde. And though she was muffled in a heavy coat, she seemed the same size as Rowena. But of course it wasn't Rowena. He had seen her coffin put aboard a train.

But what was this foolish girl doing abroad at this hour? Didn't she know there'd been a murder? She was a student, because she was carrying books under her arm. What made her braver than the others? Strangely he resented her bravery.

And with an ungovernable curiosity he followed her. Across the quadrangle, then toward the Engineering and the Physics buildings. Howard's heart began to pound faster. She was taking almost the same route that Rowena had taken on that fatal night. His curiosity mounting, he trailed after her. She was not walking too fast; he had to slow down to keep from closing the gap between them.

Then she did an utterly inconceivable thing. She abandoned the path and turned straight toward the short-cut to High Street. The madness of it appalled him. She was completely out of the light now, and only the dull glow of her

blonde head, floating before him like a beckoning will-o'-the-wisp, allowed him to keep sight of her. He broke into a trot, but too late. The blonde head had disappeared. She was in the woods.

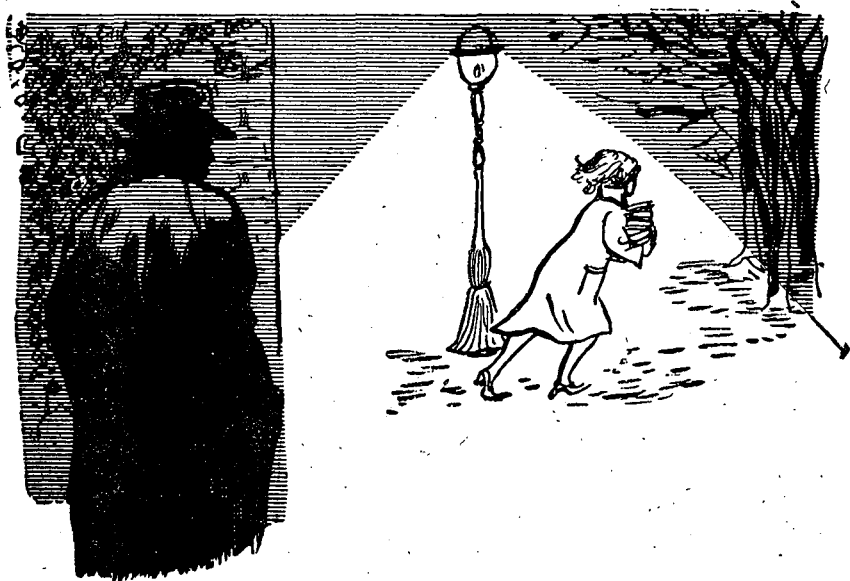
He wanted to shout to her, and he almost did, but at the last moment managed to control himself. He had almost committed a dangerous error. He couldn't have the girl mentioning to anyone that she'd been hailed by Professor Hollis in the woods where Rowena Stanley had been murdered. Not even if he made it plain to her that he was concerned for her safety. No point in calling attention to himself that way.

Perspiring from an emotion he could not identify, he turned back. He stopped at the library, fiddled away some time, then at nine escorted Miss Jensen home. In the parlor nursing a cup of tea thoughtfully provided by Mrs. Finch, he waited for Jules. The psychologist arrived about ten-thirty and Howard pounced upon him.

"I'm very disturbed, Jules," he began.

"How so?" The younger man was weary, but he submitted to the conversation.

"I saw a coed wandering about the campus after dark. She was quite alone." He decided not to



mention that the girl had entered the woods, for that would mean revealing that he had followed her.

But Jules perked up even without that. "What did I tell you, Howard? I knew the girls would get careless eventually."

"But isn't it dangerous? One oughtn't to be careless about matters of life and death."

"I thought you pooh-pooed the possibility of another murder."

"Well, I still do."

Jules smiled. "Then you shouldn't worry." The little psychologist stood up and commenced pacing the room. "I'm quite worried myself, however. A girl walks the campus alone after dark. Soon there will be others doing the same thing. This is the time I've dreaded. Our murderer will have another opportunity."

"He won't accept it," Howard said with certainty. "He wouldn't dare. If he's still in town he must know that the police are on the look-out."

Jules shook his head. "That won't faze him. He's used to taking chances. He took rather a chance when he murdered the Stanley girl, didn't he? Why should he hesitate now? Besides, he really doesn't have a choice. A man is not exactly a free agent when he acts under a compulsion."

"Compulsion?"

"Of course. This man *has* to commit another murder."

Howard stood up too. "That's ridiculous!" he exploded.

"It's perfectly logical. This first murder was committed out of revenge, resentment against society for society's having rejected him. Have these conditions changed? In the past two weeks, do you imagine that this man has suddenly found new friends, a newer, happier existence? Of course not. He is more unhappy than ever. Society forced him to commit murder. Now he feels remorse. Also he knows that he can never again be a normal man. He has taken a human life. His hands are blood-stained. All these things are the fault of society too. Don't you see? This man now has more of a grievance against the human race than he ever had before. So his compulsion is stronger than before, irresistible. No, Howard, I'm very pessimistic about this whole business. I feel like a spectator at a tragedy, where there is always more than one death. I have seen one already, but as a sophisticated member of the audience, I know there are others in store. It is as inevitable as the rising of the sun tomorrow morning."

It was a moment before Howard could speak, and then he replied almost involuntarily. "You make it

sound very convincing, Jules, *very*."

The little psychologist nodded his acceptance of the compliment. "This is one of those times," he said, "when I wish I was in some other profession, when I wish I didn't know so much about human nature." He walked to the archway. "I'm very tired. Good night, Howard." And then he was gone, up the stairs.

In his own room, Howard lay rigid and sleepless on his bed, staring at the black ceiling. His thoughts were chaotic, his emotions confused.

Of course Jules sounds logical, he told himself. But that's because he is starting from a mistaken premise. A maniac did not murder Rowena Stanley. I did. And I purposely arranged things to make it seem like the crime was the work of a maniac. This is what Jules doesn't know. Nobody knows. So one can't blame Jules for going off on the wrong track any more than one can blame the women of this town for being frightened.

Except that blonde girl who took the short-cut. She was the crazy one.

Yes, Jules was logical if the original murderer had been insane, unbalanced, acting under that com-

pulsion. And the compulsion for violence and revenge was also logical if the murderer had experienced a lonely, unhappy childhood, and especially painful adolescence, and then had grown to manhood still unappreciated, unaccepted by his fellows.

This thought plunged Howard into a sea of memories. He could admit this now, here in this solitary darkness, with no one to observe his tears. He'd been a mama's boy. Yes, he had. He had adored his mother. Why? He didn't know for sure. Perhaps because he'd never been very strong or athletic, and so never could do the things his father expected him to do. Or maybe it was simply because he had preferred his mother. She'd been so beautiful, with her long blonde hair.

Blonde! No, there was no connection whatsoever. Rowena Stanley had not resembled his mother. Rowena had been athletic, more like his father. The blonde hair was only a coincidence.

Why had his mother left him when his father died? He could have comforted her, become the man in her life. But she needed more than him. Possibly because she'd still been beautiful, and hadn't wanted to waste her beauty. So she'd needed other men, one at first, and then many of them. It



had been something of a scandal, and finally he had gone to live with an aunt, his father's sister.

But in high school and college, it was the blondes he'd always fallen for. He couldn't even remember all their names now, there'd been such a long succession of them. He hadn't been a shy young fellow by any means. Why, he'd proposed to a dozen of those blondes . . .

There was a sudden tingling in his body, a sensation that ran down to each separate finger end. Yes, the memory was quite clear and certain. Proposed a dozen times. And had been a dozen times *refused*.

He lay there trembling in the darkness. Damn Jules Manson! A shot in the dark, that was all it had been. Howard's own life did not at all resemble the life of Jules' hypothetical maniac murderer. When he, Howard, had strangled Rowena Stanley, he had been murdering her and her alone, not also his mother, not also all those lovely young blonde girls who had refused to marry him.

No, it did not follow. He was not lonely, he was not unhappy. Wasn't he doing the sort of work he liked best? Not many men were as satisfied in their professions as he. He loved literature. He wanted to communicate this love to other

people, so he was a teacher. This was the career he had chosen deliberately, in the full knowledge that a professor's pay was small, not enough really to properly support a wife. So it was just as well those blonde girls had declined.

Lonely? Perhaps, but wasn't it almost inevitable for a bachelor? Most of his fellow professors of ten or fifteen years ago had decided to risk poverty and had gotten married. Married men and bachelors have little in common. So the chasm had widened, the wall risen.

The life of Professor Howard Hollis had been centered entirely in his students. He had devoted himself to developing and refining their young, unformed minds. He had looked at those rows of fresh faces year after year, and he had said silently to them. "I love you. I want to help you. I want to open the wonderful world of literature to you. I have devoted my whole life to your betterment. I love you. Don't you understand that? Teachers and students aren't enemies, they're friends. I'm your friend. Please let me be your friend. Acknowledge me as your friend. Call me friend. I love you. Speak to me. Tell me that you realize that I'm alive, I'm a person, I'm entitled to something. Recognize me. I'm Howard Hollis. A man. A person. Tell me that you recognize

this. It's all I expect. I love you. Speak to me . . ."

But Rowena Stanley had *refused*. Rowena Stanley had *rebuffed* him. Rowena Stanley had *rejected* him. That's why he killed her. She deserved it. Now he understood this, he understood why he had to kill her. And if he had the chance he'd do the same thing again!

But she wasn't any different from the others. Why had he chosen Rowena Stanley to try to approach? Merely because she was blonde? That was hardly an adequate reason. He hadn't been in love with her, despite what he'd told her in the woods. He loved her, yes, but not in the way she'd thought. Not romantic love. He was too old for that, long past that stage. Nor lust. He'd never been lustful even in his youth, and now he was middle-aged. No, his affection for Rowena had been more the fatherly kind, the professorial kind, the same affection that he felt for his other students.

But they all ignored him! They always had. He hated them all, not just Rowena, but all of them . . . all . . . all . . .

He lay there drenched in sweat, quivering in every muscle, clenching and unclenching his fists. Waves of a strange new passion washed over him, a passion he had

never remotely experienced before, not even while he was strangling Rowena.

A passion? Or a compulsion? Compulsion . . . compulsion . . . compulsion . . .

The brave blonde girl had a pattern of movement. He did not get close enough to see whether he knew or remembered her, because he did not want to. He preferred that she remain anonymous, just a member of the student body. But he watched her from afar.

She left the library every evening about eight—probably, she was doing research there for a special paper or thesis. She took the same path, always alone, across the quadrangle, between Engineering and Science, and thence to the short-cut.

For three nights she kept to this schedule. And each night he stalked her, always a little closer, always a little farther. On the third night he went clear to the edge of the woods. Next time, he knew, he would enter the woods.

"There's another course of action this man could take," he suggested to Jules. It was late, and Jules had just returned to the house. They were having a cup of

tea. "He could give himself up."

The little psychologist arched his black brows and stared through his spectacles. "Why on earth should he do that?" he asked.

"Well, let's say he feels this compulsion you described, this uncontrollable desire to kill again. But supposing there's another part of his personality, a better part, that doesn't want to kill. So there's this inner conflict. But the better part, to prevent the worse part from committing another crime, might want to surrender."

Jules shook his dark head grimly and ponderously. "Why should he want to surrender to a society that he hates?" he demanded.

"To spare another life."

"This life he wants to spare, why is it so precious to him?"

"Well, I don't know . . ."

Jules smiled with sly triumph. "Of course you don't know, because there isn't any reason. This desire for the preservation of human life, this quality of mercy, is completely foreign to our murderer. He committed the first murder out of hate. Has the hate subsided? Does he love now? Does he want to atone? Preposterous, my friend. Consider this man's present position. In the death of Rowena Stanley he achieved a measure of revenge, but not total revenge. He has not been apprehended. The po-

lice are nowhere near a solution. Believe me, I know that, because I've talked with Chief Keegle. So our man knows he can take his revenge and get away with it. Why should he stop when he's winning, and when his job isn't finished? When it's far from being finished?"

"You're quite right, Jules. I see it now."

Jules drained the last of the tea from his cup, and rose to leave. "Stick to your own field, Howard," he advised. "Fiction and poetry, the artistic, the make-believe. Leave the real life problems to the experts."

"All right," Howard conceded, "I won't argue again."

"Fine. Good night then, Howard."

"Good night, Jules."

Friday night again, a shiveringly cold, blustery night that would make most people stay indoors even if there were not a maniac-murderer loose in the town. The wind blew cruelly across the open stretches of the campus, whined around the corners of buildings, set the bare branches of trees to creaking and groaning.

Standing outside the library, sheltered in the blackest shadow, Howard waited. Unaware of the cold wind, he had not even raised

his coat collar against it. His hat brim was turned down, however, to hide his face. But even aside from this precaution, it was doubtful whether anyone would recognize him. For he was without his briefcase, his constant companion, his trademark.

The briefcase, he had decided, would only be in his way, and be something else to get bloodied. In fact, he had determined upon a whole new approach to the problem of blood. He would use the same knife, but he could not afford this time to walk into Mrs. Finch's with stains on him or anything he carried. So he had a cloth, a cloth with no identifying marks, with which to wipe his hands and the knife. The cloth he would simply drop at the scene. It could not be traced.

The blonde girl emerged from the library almost precisely on schedule, her arms loaded with books. She passed within thirty feet of Howard, her head bent low against the wind, the dim light from a street lamp shining dully on her yellow head. Howard caught a fleeting glimpse of her profile, enough to give him the vague notion that he didn't know her. That pleased him, the thought of killing a stranger. He received other quick impressions also. Her legs did not seem particularly attractive, nor

was her walk graceful. That satisfied him too. His grudge was not against just the beautiful girls. And this was perhaps why she dared to go alone at night—she imagined her unattractiveness was a protection.

He let her get something of a start and stay well ahead of him as she crossed the quadrangle. But as she passed between Engineering and Physics, he lengthened his stride and began to catch up. By the time she'd reached the edge of the woods he'd almost overtaken her. But she did not seem to be aware of his approach, because of the howling of the wind.

There was just enough starlight and reflected glow from High Street and the campus to give some illumination as the woods closed in around them. The blonde head bobbed ahead of him like a beacon. But he was not impatient. He waited until they were well within the concealment of the trees. Then he closed the gap, treading almost upon her heels, and measuring his distance, he sprang.

He landed with his hands already around her neck, not with as good a grip as he had hoped, but good enough to stop her scream. The impact of his weight bore her to the ground, with him on top. But she fought valiantly, and she was strong. Only then did he real-

ize his mistake. An approach from the rear is not the best when trying to strangle someone. The thumbs, not the extended fingers, need to be placed on the windpipe. He let go for a second, and tried to roll around to a better position.

That was his second error. The girl seemed to be trying to reach inside her purse. What did she have there, a whistle? Desperate now, he sought his second hold, the fatal one, with thumbs at the throat. A fraction of a second late. A word issued from his victim's mouth, a single word, not really loud, not really dangerous even, but a word containing a whole revelation.

"Help!" Not a woman's voice. But a familiar voice. Belonging to Psychology Instructor Jules Manson.

A wig, a disguise, easy enough in the bundling-up winter weather. Jules Manson, so sure that the killer would strike again that he offered himself as bait.

Howard bent low, snarling into Jules' face. "You made me do this . . . you talked me into it . . . you damned pedant . . . you expert

. . . you deserve to die . . . I'm glad it's you . . ."

The explosion was muffled by the closeness of their two bodies. Howard felt a sharp stab of pain in the fleshy part of his left arm. Jules had a gun. Well, it didn't matter. Howard's thumbs pressed down hard, and the gun didn't fire again.

When he let go finally, when there was no longer any need to hold on, there were shouts coming from High Street. Somebody had heard the report. All right . . . all right . . . he could never have explained the gunshot wound anyway.

He rolled off Jules' inert body, and fumbled in his pocket for the little knife. It wasn't sharp, but it managed to open the veins in his wrists. Then he crawled away a little off the path, under some bushes where they wouldn't find him in time. He lay there, feeling his life drain out of him.

His life . . . Jules had been wrong . . . what did Jules know about anything? He had had a very happy life.



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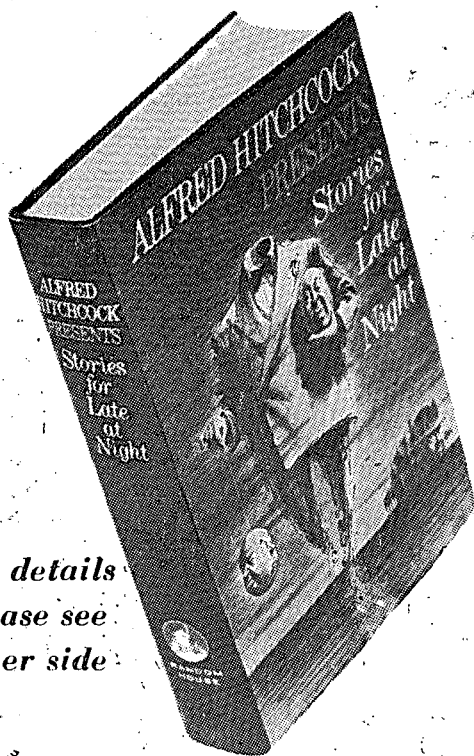
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